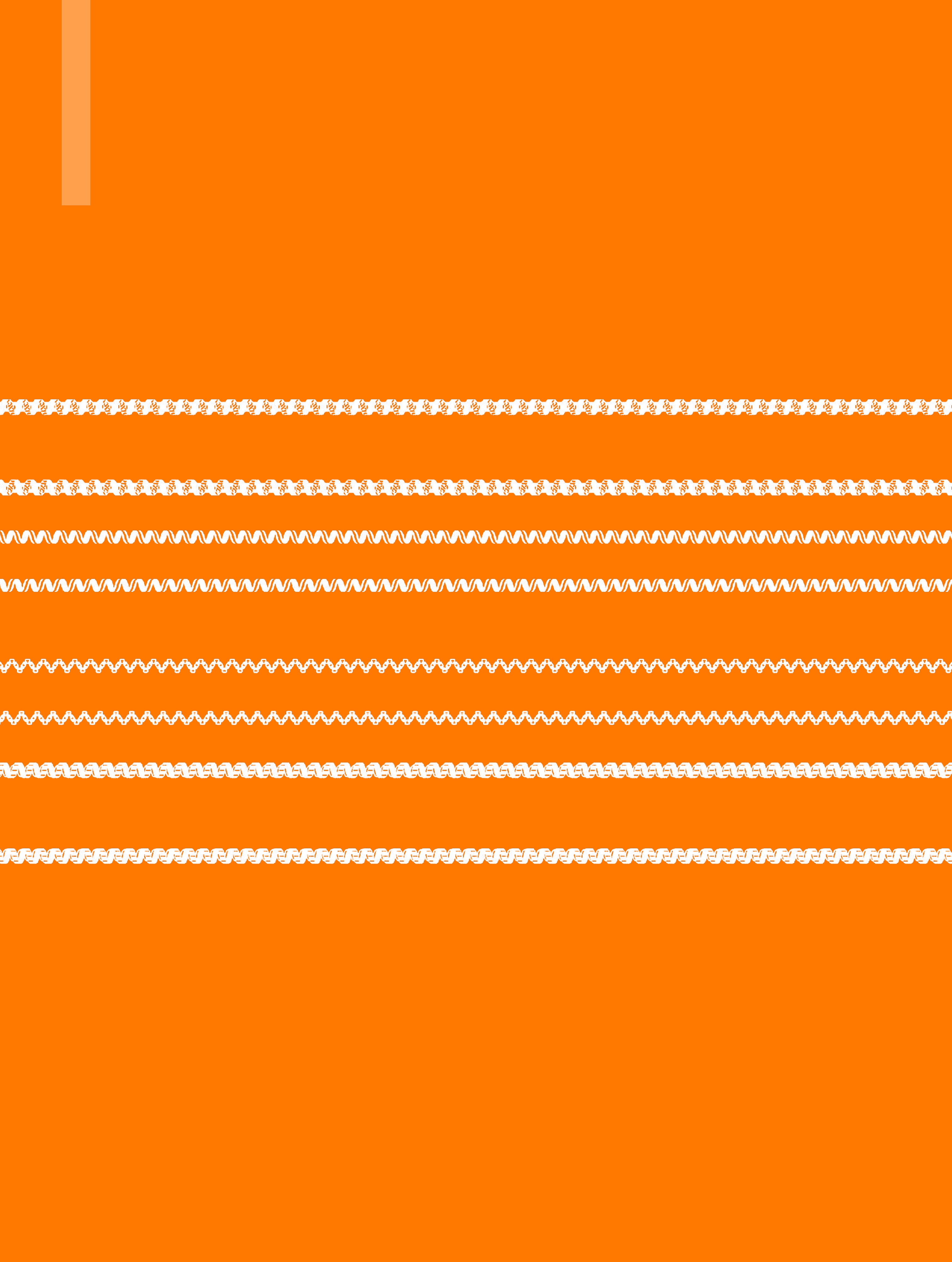

EDGE®
THE FUTURE OF INTERA MENT
ARMS
NINTENDO'S STUNNING NEW FIGHTING GAME LANDS THE KILLER BLOW FOR SWITCH
REVIEWED
YOOKA-LAYLEE
LITTLE NIGHTMARES
OUTLAST 2
MASS EFFECT: ANDROMEDA
#306
JUNE 2017

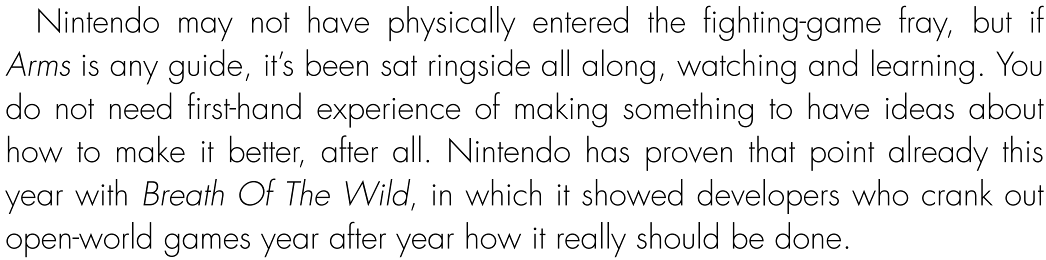


The art of fighting without fighting? Show me some of it

It's odd to think that, while the fighting game was at its peak in the 1990s, Nintendo had barely anything to do with it. We may think of *Street Fighter II* as being as much a SNES game as it was an arcade one, but the platform holder largely stood by and watched as an entire genre rose, dominated and then faded away. Nintendo has never been one for hitching itself to bandwagons, of course. But the fighting game is a genre to which the company – with its flair for character design and immaculate game balance – has always seemed perfectly suited. Yet when we think about fighting games, we do not readily think of the house of Mario.



Exclusive subscriber edition



Nintendo may not have physically entered the fighting-game fray, but if *Arms* is any guide, it's been sat ringside all along, watching and learning. You do not need first-hand experience of making something to have ideas about how to make it better, after all. Nintendo has proven that point already this year with *Breath Of The Wild*, in which it showed developers who crank out open-world games year after year how it really should be done.

Or, more accurately, how Nintendo thinks it should be done. *Arms* is to the fighting game what *Splatoon* is to the online shooter or *Mario Kart* to the driving game, stripping away many of the elements that prevent its genre from becoming truly massmarket. Like much of Nintendo's best work it is accessible, intuitive, tremendous fun and just the right side of silly.

Crucially, it's also another boost for Switch, and together with the likes of *Splatoon 2* and *Mario Kart 8 Deluxe* it rams home the point that Nintendo's new console is more than just a *Zelda* machine. For all our disappointment a few months ago when Switch's year-one software schedule was unveiled, that's a heck of a line-up for a console that's only a few months old. And in a month where we also check in on the remarkable low-cost world-building tool SpatialOS, and hear from an urban planner who's turning his craft to game design, it's a timely reminder that while bigger is great, it needn't always mean better – even if that ethos just gave us the best *Zelda* of all time.

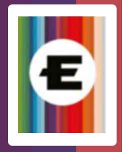


games



Hype

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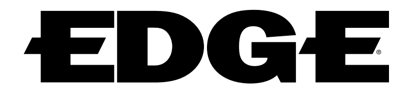
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EDITORIAL

Nathan Brown editor

Ben Maxwell features editor **Andrew Hind** art editor

CONTRIBUTORS

Elizabeth Elliott, James Leach, Cliff Newman, Steven Poole, Phil Savage, Chris Schilling, Ed Smith, Chris Thursten, Stephen Williams, Alex Wiltshire

ADVERTISING

Kevin Stoddart account director, games (+44 (0)1225 687455 kevin.stoddart@futurenet.com)

Andrew Church advertising director, games **Matt Downs** director of agency sales

Clare Dove commercial sales director

CONTACT US

+44 (0)1225 442244 edge@futurenet.com

SUBSCRIPTIONS

UK reader order line and enquiries 0844 8482852

Overseas reader order line and enquiries +44 1604 250145

Online enquiries www.myfavouritemagazines.com

Email edge@myfavouritemagazines.co.uk

MARKETING

Sascha Kimmel marketing director **Emma Clapp** marketing manager

Helen Harding campaign manager

CIRCULATION

Juliette Winyard trade marketing manager (+44 (0)7551 150984)

LICENSING

Matt Ellis head of international licensing (matt.ellis@futurenet.com)

Tel: +44 (0)1225 442244 Fax (yes, really, fax): +44 (0)1225 732275

PRODUCTION & DISTRIBUTION

Mark Constance production manager **Nola Cokely** production controller **Jo Gay** ad production controller

MANAGEMENT

Ross Andrews art and design director **Aaron Asadi** creative director, magazines **Tony Mott** group editor in chief

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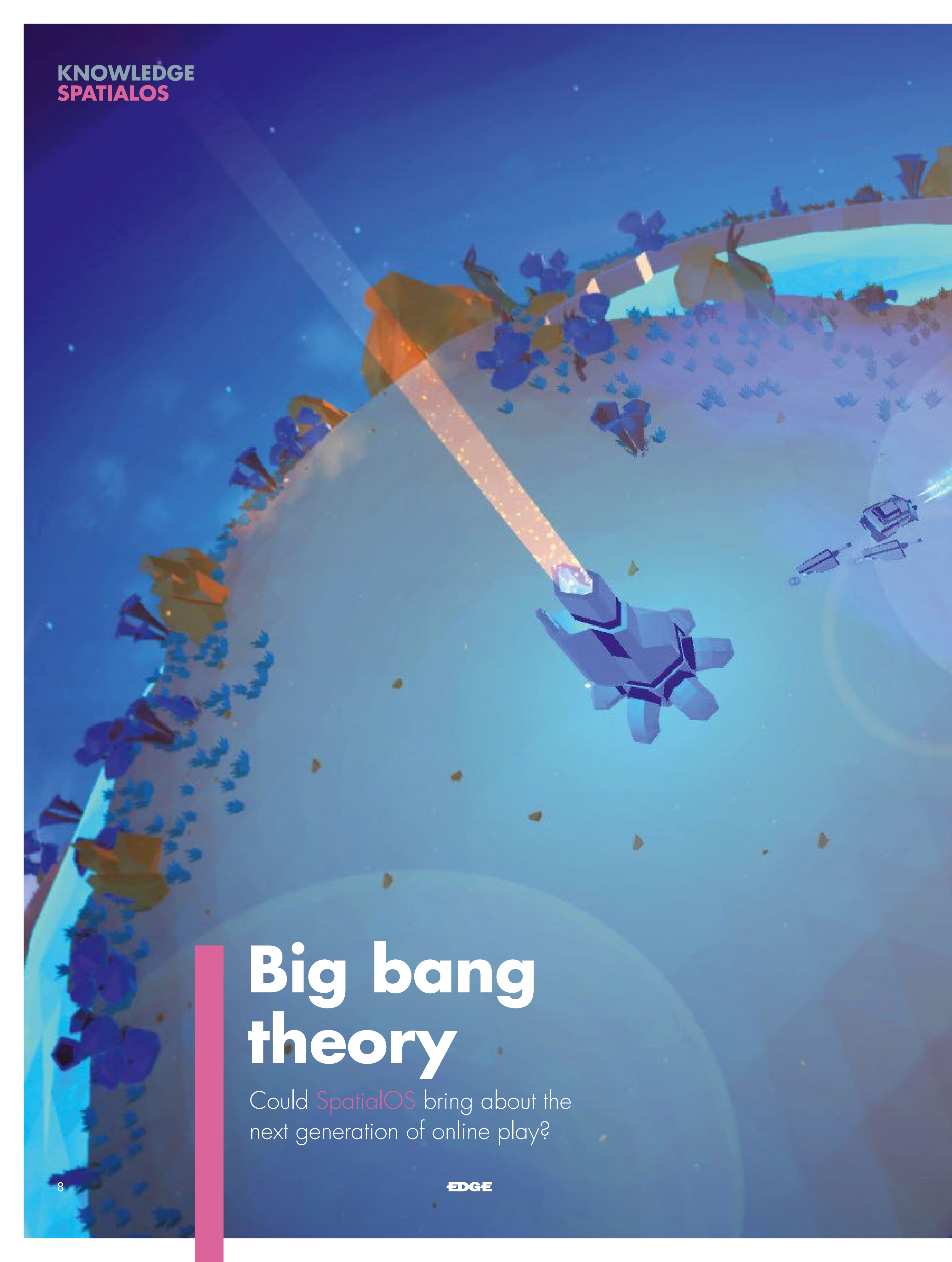
Chief executive Zillah Byng-Maddick
Non-executive chairman Peter Allen
Chief financial officer Penny Ladkin-Brand

Tel +44 (0)207 0424000 (London)
Tel +44 (0)1225 442244 (Bath)



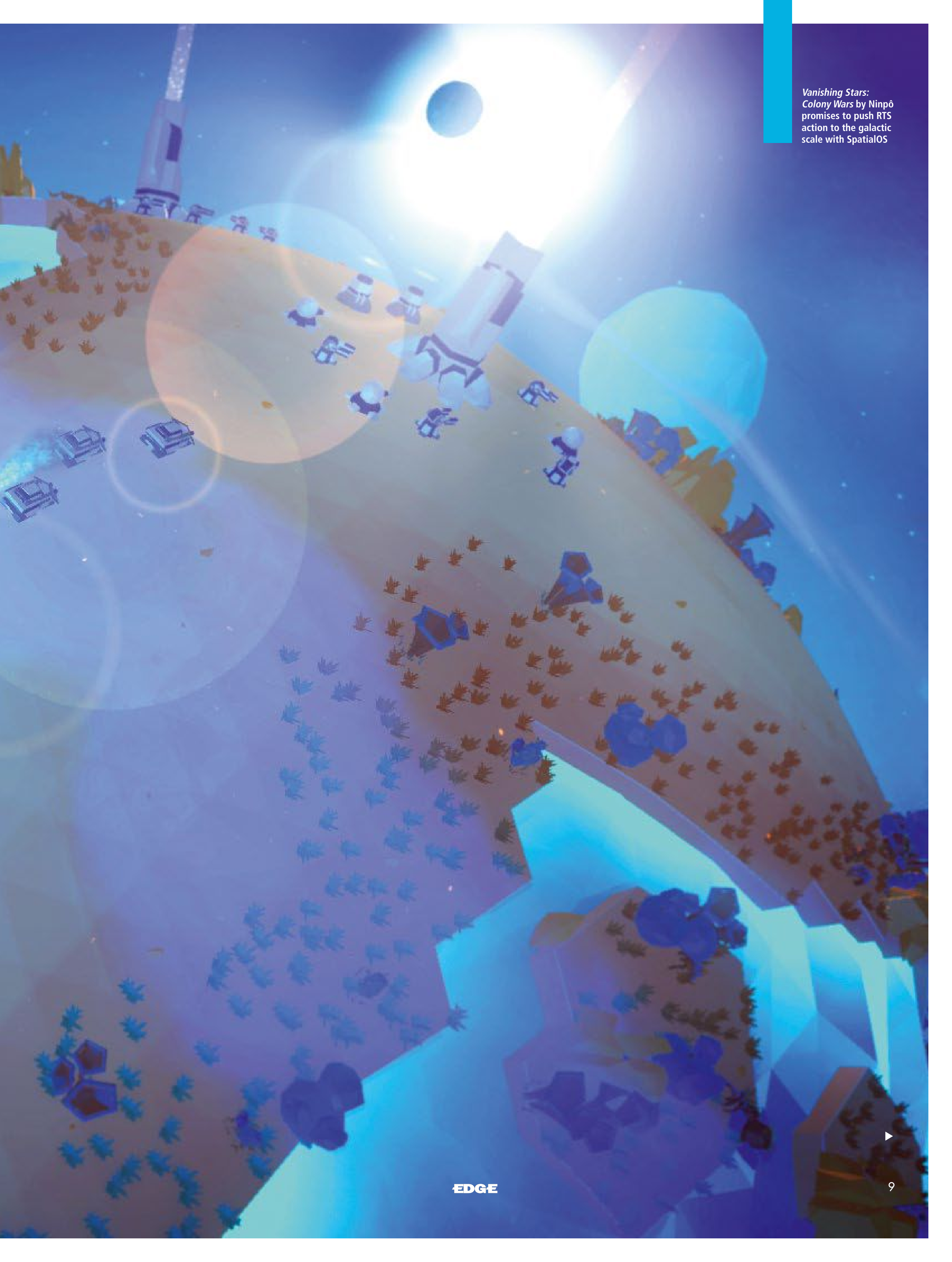
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Big bang theory

Could SpatialOS bring about the next generation of online play?



Vanishing Stars: Colony Wars by Ninpô promises to push RTS action to the galactic scale with SpatialOS



Herman Narula founded Improbable in 2012

The name Improbable is either the best moniker for the company making SpatialOS, or the worst. It's a name that plays on this revolutionary new tool's expectation-busting nature, since it's a networking technology that has the potential to transform online games. It can realise huge, richly complex virtual worlds that can exist and change without their players' input – and not just for large studios with enormous budgets. In short, it could democratise a powerful new vision for networked games and bring about the next generation of online play.

Its nature as a networked set of game engines working in parallel is hard to grasp, and it makes big promises. Huge and persistent online worlds that will be free of many of the traditional restrictions of online play? It sounds too good to be true. That's why Improbable, which is headquartered in London and has 170 employees, has opened SpatialOS up for developers to play around with. "It's our hope that it's developers building great games on top of our platform that will demonstrate what's possible," says **Herman Narula**, Improbable CEO and co-founder. And as well as getting them to communicate it, they're also helping Improbable refine and stress-test SpatialOS, as well as explore what new features it should include.

The fruits of these developers' work have just started to come to light, though we first outlined Improbable's headliner, Bossa Studios' fabulously ambitious physics sandbox game *Worlds Adrift*, in **E**287. Set on player-sculpted floating islands and sky ships, it showcases SpatialOS' potential with a single world for all players and its take on persistence – crafted items that exist and remain in the world until taken by others or left to rust away. It's due to enter a closed beta via Steam's Early Access in late April, but alongside it are other games, such as *Lazarus*, Spilt Milk's MMO take on *Asteroids*, which is already publicly playable. There's *Vanishing Stars*, a galaxy-scale RTS, and *Chronicles Of Elyria*, a dizzyingly deep fantasy MMO.

Each is made by a very small studio taking the opportunity to explore what happens when many players interact in spaces that permanently respond to their actions. "It's a big enabler for small teams to think about massively multiplayer [games]," says **Mundi Vondi**, co-founder of Klang, maker of *Seed*, a *RimWorld*-like multiplayer life sim in which massive communities of players build bases on alien planets, working with and against each other. "Normally you have this massive overhead that requires so much funding that you have little flexibility to do experimentation or innovation. It has to bank, and the problem is that MMOs start to stagnate, to the extent that people now think MMOs are a thing of the past, which is ridiculous. Obviously they're a thing of the future. We just haven't been able to experiment enough."

Andrew Roper of Spilt Milk Studios says that until SpatialOS the options for developers wanting to make multiplayer games were to either make a server themselves or go peer-to-peer. "Peer-to-peer is what we did with [Spilt Milk's 2015 co-op shooter] *Tango Fiesta*, so whoever made the lobby was the server host, and it all got very complicated. I got through a few bottles of rum. Spatial takes all that legwork away."

"It all got very complicated. I got through a few bottles of rum. Spatial takes all that legwork away"

And more than that, SpatialOS is also about scaling a game across many individual servers, which Narula says is "so disgustingly hard that most developers just don't bother with it." Even most big MMOs run on single servers. "The idea, in a nutshell, is to encapsulate all the work, all the heavy lifting, required to build a game that runs on 50 cores, 1,000 cores or two cores. To make it really cheap and really easy, so that everyone can fundamentally build new types of games."

The cheapness comes from the fact that developers won't need to invest in buying servers or in figuring out peer-to-peer systems for themselves as they make their games. And, due to a partnership Improbable has struck with Google Cloud Platform, it's also offering 'qualified' developers subsidised access, which for many will mean it's free to develop games with it and even run alphas and betas, and only start paying once their projects are commercially launched.

Furthermore, the distributed nature of SpatialOS means developers can scale the sizes of their online worlds to fit their populations. "Theoretically, there's no limit to the number of players," says **Andrew Smith** of Spilt Milk. "We can expand outwards to accommodate more people. It's more a question of what balance and density of players works best. But we're aiming for thousands of concurrents."

Devs can therefore use SpatialOS to suit their needs and the relative success of their games. But as well as connecting many players, the tech can also run world physics and AI in the cloud – an outsourcing of computational labour that offers even more promise. For *Lazarus*, a twitch shooter, the player's PC merely takes control inputs, calculating all physics on Improbable's systems. It might sound as if this would cause a lack of immediacy from the player's point of view, but with common networking techniques such as client-side protection and nautical dead-reckoning Roper says it retains the arcade-style sharpness a game like *Lazarus* requires.

Indeed, Narula tells us that under certain circumstances, SpatialOS can reduce overall latency since its many parallel cores can process incoming data as it arrives, rather than in sequence as many single servers have to, and it isn't susceptible to the server slowdown that's caused by large crowds of players congregating in large battles.

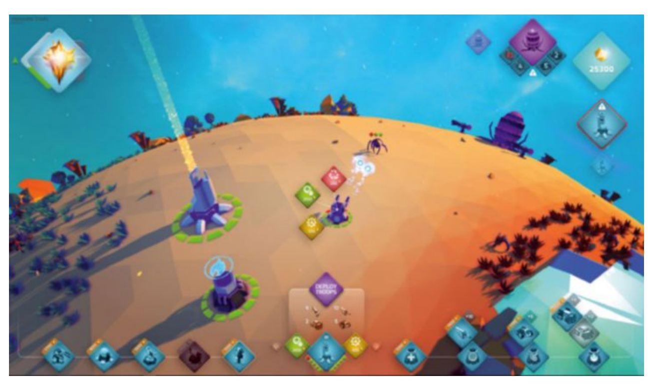
But Improbable is thinking bigger than merely improving what's already here. "Success for us is the realisation of that dream we grew up with in the '90s," says Narula. "It's the creation of ubiquitous virtual worlds that are as meaningful to us as our experiences in the real world." ■



SEED

Developer Klang Games **Origin** Germany

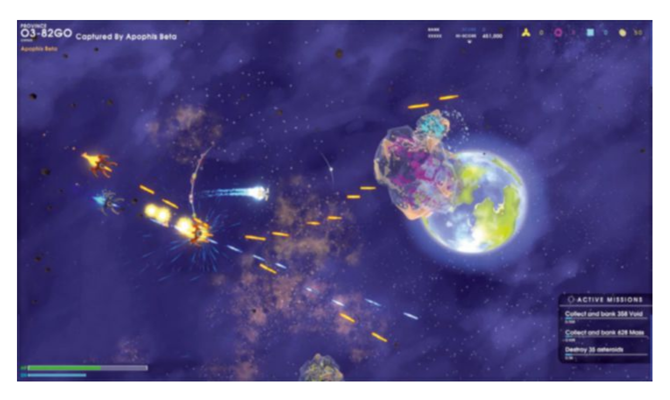
With the aim of simulating big communities of player-controlled characters, *Seed* tasks players with colonising an alien planet in a post-Earth future. Developed by a team founded by three CCP alumni, *Seed* applies *Eve Online*'s ambition to the human scale. You'll be ordering up to ten characters to chop wood and create items and buildings, the game managing them in realtime so you can log off and let them get on with things, including responding to potential attacks from other players. "We want players to work together, to build solid communities together continuously," says Mundi Vondi, who imagines emergent situations such as a gang of players kidnapping a character from an enemy group and holding them to ransom for resources. He also hopes for players to construct together. "The ultimate dream for us is to have actual cities, with all their moving parts running on a multiplayer server."



LAZARUS

Developer Spilt Milk Studios **Origin** UK

Set in 160,000 sq km of 2D space but able to expand to fit player population sizes, *Lazarus* is a massively multiplayer take on *Asteroids* that features dynamically created missions, territory warfare, mining, defence construction, ship upgrades and tech trees. This is a persistent universe, with a finite number of resources for thousands of concurrent players to team up and fight against each other to win. But it lasts for only a week before the universe is wiped and players start again. Not all is lost, though: there will be secret ways for players to pull some of their progression through to the next week. The limitations of ping mean that it won't have one universe for all players but three – one each for the Americas, Europe and Asia – but it's a taut demonstration of SpatialOS' promise. It's not only applicable to sprawling strategy games and RPGs, but also those that hinge on lightning-fast reactions and skill.



VANISHING STARS: COLONY WARS

Developer Ninpô **Origin** France

SpatialOS games can often seem to realise what you always hoped a genre would become. *Vanishing Stars* is one of those, an MMORTS in which you establish colonies on planets, steadily capturing land and securing resources from both AI and other players. Once you've conquered the globe, you take off and capture another, steadily extending your empire into a single shared galaxy. Since other players can capture your planets while you're offline, you can set strategies and defences for an AI as well as go directly into battle. Though Ninpô is a two-person studio, *Colony Wars* is one of two games in development. The other is a digital-physical collectible card game based in the same universe; *Colony Wars* was originally a simple extension for Facebook, but after Ninpô was introduced to SpatialOS its scope exploded. "Two impossible projects! Seems a bit crazy, but that's what inspired us," says Cédric Tatangelo.



CHRONICLES OF ELYRIA

Developer Soulbound Studios **Origin** US

So far 15 years in the making, *Chronicles Of Elyria* is a fantasy MMO that aims to solve many of the problems with its genre and in doing so has become the ultimate MMORPG, at least in concept. Set in what creator Jeromy Walsh says will be the largest-ever world of its type, with each continent being 30,000 sq km, every item is persistent, rusting when abandoned, and everything you do is meant to have some impact on the world. It features a player-driven economy, which extends to the quest system: if an NPC asks you to gather 15 pieces of ore, they'll make them into saleable items. There are survival mechanics, but no grind or endgame. Instead your character is given a destiny to fulfil before they die: characters age a year for every realtime week, so you'll be trying to sire heirs who'll inherit your achievements and in whom you'll reincarnate. "We really wanted to recreate the human condition," says Walsh.

Cities of gold

Meet the geographer on a mission to bring urban renewal into virtual spaces

What makes a great videogame city? It's a question developers and players obsess over, and one that geographer, urban planner and game designer **Konstantinos Dimopoulos** has positioned himself to answer as a consultant 'game urbanist', an expert in the form and function of cities who wants to help virtual ones feel like real places.

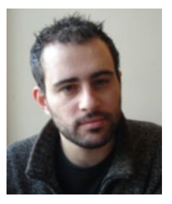
Think of the Shanghai in *Kane & Lynch 2: Dog Days*, which despite being the setting for a corridor shooter manages to conjure a sense of a rapidly growing metropolis, taking place in backstreets, building sites and informal markets. "If you think about it, they don't show you much of it, but they imply tonnes," says Dimopoulos, who is based in Athens and is currently working remotely on Frogwares' forthcoming *The Sinking City*, a game set in a open, Lovecraft-inspired world. "Obviously, basing it on a real city, things are easier, but having the mastery and understanding to pick what to show, that they did brilliantly." Or think *GTAIV*'s Liberty City. "There is something used in cartography called simplification, and it decides how much detail enters the map depending on the map's scale," he tells us. "Instead of drawing five buildings, you draw two, and the *GTA* team did this for New York, simplifying everything in a very cartographic way to a point where they could manage the work it demanded."

One thing that Dimopoulos stresses is that developers should think about cities as geographers, rather than architects. "A city is not a sum of walls, roads and infrastructure," he says. "It's everything that's happening in it, everything that constantly shapes and devolves it. It's never static, whereas architecture sort of is." A city is therefore the way its inhabitants dress, whether it's flat or hilly, the kind of sky it lies under and what its roads are made of. It's also sounds, of crowds and traffic. Dimopoulos points towards a classic book by urban planner Kevin Lynch, The Image Of The City, which identifies the ways we perceive and understand our urban spaces: the routes we take through them, the boundaries within them, their intersections and their landmarks.

Being memorable, landmarks both aid navigation and give players a sense of position in a place, whether it's fully realised or not. "You can easily play with them," Dimopoulos says. "The City 17 tower is visible from everywhere, and landmarks can imply things. If there's a bridge in the background, its mere existence instantly implies a big city. It saves a lot of creative work instantly." Being so vast, much of the craft of designing videogame cities is about the practicalities of creating them. Anyone can envisage a vast endeavour like Liberty City, but it also takes a vast team to build it, from its infrastructure of roads to its buildings, pedestrians and soundscapes. "It really does feel like New York, but it's something that requires a triple-A studio," he says.

> "A usual mistake is explaining that a city is a huge and sprawling place, and then here's the one butcher's shop"

For most other games the fallback is a city that feels too small or too empty. "A usual mistake is explaining to us that a city is a huge and sprawling place, and then here's the one butcher's shop." Or there's the example of a capital city in an MMO, populated by 100 NPCs. While



Dimopoulos got into game development through a blog he started in the mid-'00s



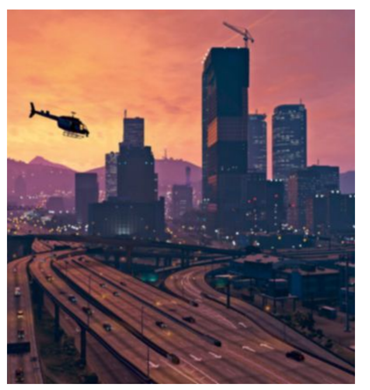
Dimopoulos admires many aspects of *Deus Ex: Mankind Divided*'s Prague, he feels it's a little too small, being focused into just a few self-contained districts. "Even adding a few useless buildings in between would help things," he says, indicating the potential of procedurally generating simple building forms.

Often, he says, these generated buildings can be blocked off from player access or depicted in the middle distance. But when they're within players' reach, it's a common concern they'll invite frustration that they're not accessible. Dimopoulos, however, believes this isn't a problem, reasoning that no one expects to enter each house on a real-world street. And, he says, it's possible to imply a wider city beyond the fake doors with working buzzers that go unanswered, or police that tell you to move along.

Making sense is key to Dimopoulos' vision. He says cities should be fully imagined, pointing towards *Dishonored*'s Dunwall, where an economy based on whale oil gives a foundation for the entire game. Or they can be more fantastical. "For a game I was working on there was this idea of buildings that had AI systems that moved them around according to where they were needed, what their occupants wanted, and their value. We had all the problems: how were they going to move? Is there any control to their movements? But by solving one problem, you get all sorts of new ideas."

Or the imagination can be in the details, taken from research of real cities. "Maybe it's common to see little Buddhas wrapped in foil with incense burning next to them. You can so easily take and modify these things for your city and they give so much character. This creates human life, a simulacrum of it." ■

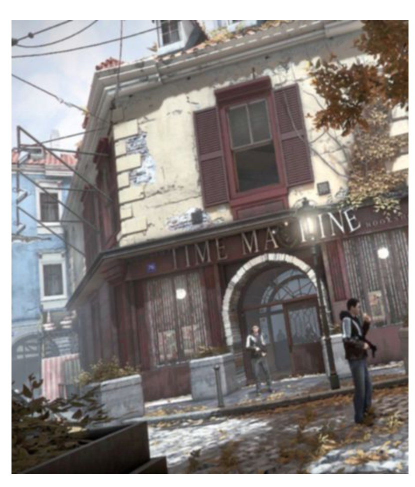
The Sinking City **is an open-world game about investigators facing Lovecraftian horror in a steadily flooding city in New England, currently being developed by Frogwares**





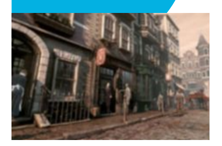


TOP LEFT ***GTAV*'s Los Santos doesn't need to lean on suggestion of size because you can go there.** TOP RIGHT ***Dishonored*'s Dunwall is founded on an economy based on whaling.** ABOVE ***Kane & Lynch 2*'s Shanghai looks like it was shot on a video camera.** RIGHT **In *Crimes And Punishments*' London you keep seeing the same NPCs doing the same**



FAMILIAR VALUES

Players instantly understand the places they know



When a game budget can't stretch to modelling acres of urban real estate, one way of implying a wider culture is to lean on players' familiarity with certain cities, such as Sherlock Holmes' London. "Most people can conjure how a street would look because they've seen it in films and TV – it helps you so much." Sci-fi cities can't use this so well, but they can still hold the same set of recognisable functions that real cities have: places to live, to work, and transport between them. "And then you can think about what hasn't been used before or of weird things, like this is a city that no one stays in, or which no one can move around in."



"Working in VR informed how I conceived each level." Boucher says. "You need details to surround and ground the player, or you start to feel completely disembodied in front of this floating toy."



FACE TIME

Ko-op Mode blends plastic-toy nostalgia with slick design to conjure up miniaturised worlds

Gnog is a striking-looking VR puzzle game from Ko-op Mode, inspired by Bluebird Toys' Polly Pocket and Mighty Max miniaturised playsets. It's like a psychedelic take on *The Room*'s more intricate puzzle boxes, with each of the game's brightly coloured levels taking the form of a robotic head that contains a tiny world. By rotating the heads and interacting with the various switches, buttons and other contraptions contained within, secrets are gradually revealed.

"We've tried to make the levels as tactile as possible," designer and artist **Samuel Boucher** says. "Seeing the toys suspended there in VR, just within arm's reach – that was huge. Suddenly these abstract shapes just felt so much more real and present, like you could just reach out and pick them up and keep playing with them. It's definitely our favourite way to play the game."

Boucher, who is also a graphic designer and illustrator, taught himself to model in 3D using SketchUp for the project. "Because of my background, which was exclusively 2D, *Gnog* is simply the extension of my style in three dimensions. I'm inspired by industrial design, furniture, and surreal colour palettes, and a lot of those shapes and flourishes have found their way into *Gnog*." The game launches for PS4 and PSVR on May 2. ■

Soundbytes

Game commentary in snack-sized mouthfuls



"I look at my friends, they have a lot more spare time. It's **a very intense business**. It's all-encompassing. It seems like I should relax for a little bit."

Wasteland creator **Brian Fargo** contemplates retirement. If it helps, old stick, we feel like that every four weeks



"Every signal we send is of censorship, disapproval and discouragement. **Videogames do not hurt anybody**."

Senator **David Leyonhjelm** argues against the famously open-minded Australian censors' *Outlast 2* ban



"They offered me a percentage of their profits. I said, 'No, there will be no profit at all – **give me all my money** right now!' It was stupid."

Andrzej Sapkowski, creator of Geralt of Rivia, wishes he'd seen the success of *The Witcher* series coming

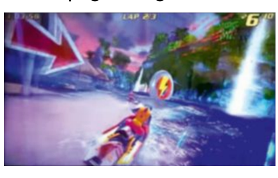
"I've become the troublesome elder that I hated when I was young. **Like a demon king in an RPG**, I'm waiting for a new hero to come and slay me."



Nier: Automata director **Yoko Taro** on the perils of achieving your life goals

ARCADE WATCH

Keeping an eye on the coin-op gaming scene



Game *Splash!*
Manufacturer Bandai Namco, Raw Thrills

A collaboration between Bandai Namco, Raw Thrills, Specular Interactive and Injoy Motion, *Splash!* is a new jet-ski-racing game that channels the spirits of *Wave Race* and *Road Rash*. The sit-down cabinet's seats resemble the rear portion of a jet ski, complete with red lights on the back and motion feedback that allows them to pitch and roll in sync with the on-screen action. The handlebars, meanwhile, are mounted to a rigid unit in front of the screen and have an attack button that lets you knock other competitors off their vehicles if you get alongside them. Riders can also perform stunts in the air.

Visually, the sit-on jet skis are unexpectedly subdued, sporting a predominantly black-and-blue colour scheme that's more car interior than arcade machine, but the screen housing's mix of multi-coloured neon strip lighting, yellow-and-blue marquees, and the typeface used for the logo evoke *Splatoon*'s noisier aesthetic. The game has five tracks to choose from, all of which are playable in reverse, and six characters. Courses are all pleasingly overwrought (one sees the racers start in the swimming pool of a cruise ship before leaping into the swelling waves below) and stuffed with shortcuts – some of which see you careering along cliff paths rather than waterways. There's currently no official release date.



My Favourite Game
James Carter

The Snakehips producer on bizarre multiformat setups, pining for local mutliplayer, and the surprising appeal of golf games

James Carter is one half of electronic duo Snakehips, which he formed with Oliver Lee after the pair met on a business trip to Hong Kong. Snakehips found early success after posting remixes on Soundcloud, and since then the duo's profile has spiralled rapidly.

When did you first get into games?
I think I got the original Game Boy, and one of the *Super Mario* games with it – I can't remember which one. I was pretty young at the time, and I remember that my parents only allowed me one hour each evening to play on it. I used to try and lock myself in the bathroom to get a little bit longer. It was worse because you couldn't save on it, so I had to get as far as I could in the game each night, and then start again the next time. It was an absolute nightmare actually. After that I got a PC, and I used to buy… Well, to be honest, go into newsagents and *pinch* the demo discs from all the PC gaming mags. They'd be full of freeware games and demos. Then I got a demo of *Duke Nukem 3D*, and it was my first ever FPS, and I loved it. Somehow I managed to persuade my parents to buy me that.

Were you allowed to play for more than an hour?
[Laughs] I was getting a bit older by then, so I was allowed to play a little bit more. But there was still a cap on how long for. I don't think they thought it was very good for me. This was before games were seen as an art form – a lot of people just saw it as teenagers wasting time. Now it's respected on the same level as films. Plus, it's very good for your dexterity!

HISSTORY
Snakehips make downtempo electronic music that fuses R&B, hip-hop, soul, and other influences. The duo released debut single Days Of You, which features vocals from Sinead Harnett, in 2014, and have since worked with a series of huge names, including Tinashe, Chance The Rapper, Zayn, Aanysa and MØ – achieving global success in the process, an achievement cemented by a worldwide tour last year. You can find information on tours and releases on Twitter: @snakehipsuk



Do you still play PC games?
Well, after the PC I got an N64, then a PS2 and Xbox 360, and now I'm back on PlayStation with a PS4. I never really got into playing online – I played *Call Of Duty* a little bit, but it never quite clicked. So I tend to play older, offline games. I'm currently playing *Resident Evil 4*, which I downloaded from the PlayStation store for, like, £4. It's *so* good – I've been playing it every night for hours.

Do you and Oliver play games together?
He plays a little bit, but not as much as me. He has an N64 and *Mario Kart 64*, so we play that whenever I'm at his. But we recently did a tour of America for a month, and we were in a big bus that had a PS3 at the back of it. At one point we went to some secondhand game store over there and ended up getting *Tiger Woods PGA Tour 12*. I'd never played a golf game before, and I fell in love with it. It was so much fun. That's something I really miss, too: local multiplayer. I used to play the *Skate* games a lot, and even then it was frustrating that you couldn't do two-player split-screen – you could in *Tony Hawks*. I think it's a reflection of our society that everyone's hyper-connected, but spends more time alone than ever.

"It's a reflection of our society that everyone's hyper-connected, but spends more time alone than ever"

Have any videogame soundtracks had an influence on your own work?
Well, *The Legend Of Zelda: Ocarina Of Time* was a huge influence on my love of melodies. I just loved *Zelda*. I actually bought an ocarina when I was younger. I loved everything about that game, especially the music. All of the tunes were single-line melodies, and they showed me that just playing five notes in order could be really nice. The simplicity of it that was really powerful.

You mentioned *Resident Evil 4* – are you a fan of horror games in general?
I am, absolutely, but I haven't actually played that many of them. I really liked *Dead Space*, but I haven't played any of the *Silent Hill* games even though I've always wanted to. But *Resident Evil 3* and *2* are on the PlayStation store, so I'm going to move on to them once I've finished *4*.

And what's your favourite game?
It has to be *Ocarina Of Time*. It absolutely made my childhood. It was the first exposure I had to fantasy and magic and supernatural stuff. And I experienced it at a time in my life when things were still magical. I probably didn't still believe in Santa at that point, but as close to that time as you can get; when you're still a kid and you still have your innocence. And because of that it was just such an amazing experience. I've played through it loads of times, now, and I did again recently – I still love it. I have an odd setup: I've got this emulator on my Mac, with *Ocarina* and *GoldenEye*, and they run perfectly on it. So I play *Ocarina* whenever I'm on aeroplanes using a PS2 controller. It's wicked. ■

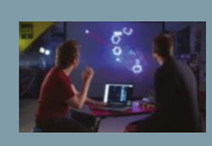


Carter (pictured) and Lee's profile has grown rapidly thanks to their high-profile collaborations and distinctive musical style. Their most recent single, Don't Leave, features MØ

WEBSITE

Gamesman catalogue archive
bit.ly/gamesmen catalogues

If, like us, you spent a good portion of your childhood pawing through the Argos catalogue and back pages of magazines coveting the outrageously expensive consoles and games, The Gamesmen's archive should offer a pleasant shot of nostalgia. While the catalogues don't reach back as far as the Australian retailer's founding in 1982, it still takes in 26 years of seasonal bulletins. You can flick through each one and relive a time when the Master System was still being marketed more aggressively than the newly released Mega Drive, the prospect of whacking a 512kb RAM expansion card in your Amiga 500 felt revelatory, and adding a Soundblaster card to your 486 DX2 rig was something to get really fired up about.



VIDEO

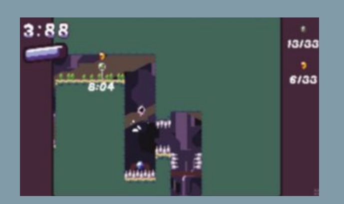
Asteroids with lasers
bit.ly/laserasteroids

Asteroids has long evaded being captured in an arcade-perfect home conversion. The symbiotic relationship between the original's gameplay and those piercing vector-drawn visuals is incredibly difficult to emulate, but that hasn't stopped Youtuber and comedian Matt Parker from teaming up with visual artist and programmer Seb Lee-Delisle to have a go. Their solution involves some coding wizardry, a giant screen and a dangerously powerful 4W RGB laser. Not quite a solution for the average living room, then, but learning about the guts of *Asteroids* makes for fascinating viewing anyway.

WEB GAME

Wave Run
bit.ly/waverun

Created for Global Game Jam 2017, Jamie Rollo's fast-paced jetpacking platformer is a formidable challenge. There are shades of *Super Meat Boy* in the precision long jumps and danger-covered surfaces, but rather than rely entirely on momentum, the rocket on your back affords you some life-saving thrust. You can fire small jets after jumping – to hover, adjust your position or arrest a fall – or fling yourself in any direction you choose using a jet boost. You can combine these two moves with wall jumps and running to create an unbroken flow of movement through the spike-lined and water-filled passageways. The jetpack uses fuel, however, so you'll need to top up from awkwardly placed depots. It's thrilling stuff, and generous checkpointing ensures the game remains fun rather than infuriating.



THIS MONTH ON EDGE

When we weren't doing everything else, we were thinking about stuff like this

SOUNDTRACK

Planet Coaster OST
bit.ly/planetcoasterLP

There's a lot to like about *Planet Coaster*, but one of its most appealing – and surprising – aspects is the Jim Guthrie and JJ Ipsen-penned soundtrack. Big-hearted, lilting slices of expansive Americana, the compositions feel at once disconnected from, and yet perfect for, the game. Indeed, these are the tunes that gently waft in and provide welcome relief from the cacophony of the rides and screaming patrons when you zoom out from the action. Now the soundtrack is available through iam8bit as a beautiful gatefold double LP featuring pink and purple vinyl and art by Syd Weiler. A good way to withdraw from any hectic situation, we'd say.



continue

Scorpio king
Microsoft's new console is an absolute monster

Link in park
Switch means we don't have to choose between vitamin D and *Zelda*

March of progress
Dice switches to monthly updates for *Battlefield 1*

Dash mode
Microsoft updates Xbox One's dashboard, and clears a very low bar

quit

Sting in the tail
If it's going to catch PS4, it'll need more than *Halo*

Lost control
If only tiny hands would stop hiding the Joy-Cons beneath sofa cushions

What is it good for?
Activision plans years' worth of *COD* movies

Sharing over
Why do publishers get to decide if we can use PS4's screenshot button?

TWEETS

If you doubt that Steam is growing in China: for last 3 months we've sold 3x as many units of *The Long Dark* there as in the US.
Raphael Von Lierop @Raphlife
Game director, *The Long Dark*

The two best VR games are *Alien: Isolation* and *Half-Life 2* and they both have had their VR support broken so you can't do it anymore
Joe Wintergreen @joewintergreen
Designer, Impromptu Games

I just want everything on Switch. It really irritates me when I can't take a game into the kitchen to check my rice is boiling.
Geraint Evans @_geraintevans_
Founder, Rice Digital

Silly idea, but proper prefiltering of equirect polar compression could be done directly by truncating horizontal jpg DCT coefficients.
John Carmack @ID_AA_Carmack
CTO, Oculus





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DISPATCHES JUNE



Issue 305

Dialogue

Send your views, using 'Dialogue' as the subject line, to edge@futurenet.com. Our letter of the month wins a year's subscription to PlayStation Plus, courtesy of Sony Interactive Entertainment



PlayStation.Plus

Kick off

I'm sure many who have managed to complete *Breath Of The Wild* will have seen Corey Bunnell, the sole non-Japanese name to appear on Nintendo's development end credits. Ten years ago he posted on an online forum sharing his dreams to go to Japan and work for Nintendo. It's truly inspiring to see that after years of hard work he didn't only achieve his dream but had a hand in making the greatest game of all time. And in 2017, we need all the inspiring stories we can get.

So I'll be doing a Corey myself. What with some seismic changes in my personal and work life that all came to a head at the end of last year, topped off with the double clusterfuck of Brexit and Trump, I'm making plans to bid good riddance to the west and start over in Japan.

You can say my love of Japan was rooted in my growing up with videogames, but at the same time my favourite games over the years have enriched my understanding of Japanese culture. Still, there's only so much that playthroughs of *Shenmue*, *Project Diva*, *Yakuza* and *Persona* can show me - I need to be there living it for myself.

Of course, I'm not so naive to believe that it's going to be all sushi and cherry blossoms. The language barrier is going to be a problem (but hey, I still enjoyed playing through the Japanese version of *Persona 5* despite putting my Google Translate app up to the screen every other minute), and I've read my fair share of horror stories from English teachers working there.

I also wonder if the Japanese culture of overworking will mean I'll once again have no time for gaming. Luggage limitations mean I might not even be able to squeeze a PS4 into my suitcase, though I suppose I could just buy a Japanese model once I'm there. But that's also why I'm very happy to own a Switch, on which I'll be able to squeeze in sessions during commutes and still play at home whether or not I have a TV.

So wish me luck as I try to get a job and visa to get to Japan in the next few months. And if you fancy getting me a going away gift, then maybe I should definitely find a way to hang onto my PS4.

Alan Wen

All the best to you on your adventure, Alan. And when you get settled – before March 2019, ideally – make sure you send for us.

Final score

Having enjoyed games for over 20 years, and followed critic review scores for nearly as long, I've become convinced that there is a genre bias in scoring games. Almost all games that receive the highest scores across multiple multi-format publications seem to be limited to a narrow scope of gaming genres. A cursory look at **Edge** 10s reveals a heavy presence of certain titles – *Zelda*, *Mario*, *GTA*, etc. But my favourite genre, JRPGs, although providing the most memorable experiences for me, rarely seem to hit those 'perfect' scores across publications.

> "My favourite genre, JRPGs, rarely seem to hit those 'perfect' scores across publications"

I believe it is the nature of different genres that is responsible for this. A game like *Bayonetta* is lots of fun and probably worthy of a 10, but in many ways it's a simpler format to refine and perfect. JRPGs, on the other hand, have to balance story progression with world exploration, the control you can have over supporting characters versus fast-paced battles, etc. There are so many more pitfalls to fall into and because they really are impossible to balance perfectly, it damages their chances of acquiring legendary scores.

And yet the ambition and scale of *FFXV* and the effort that went into it can never be fully recognised in a score because the genre type forces too many constraints. However, I wonder just because a game has 'flaws' or is



www.facebook.com/edgeonline
Discuss gaming topics with fellow **Edge** readers

slightly 'unbalanced' in parts should that really take away from the whole positive experience of what they have achieved?
Robert Gilbert

If *FFXV* is a 10 to you, then great, but it's not our job to play favourites. Still, it's not long ago that *Final Fantasy XII* was **Edge**'s game of the year; it could happen again.

Open goal

The lead designer of Magic: The Gathering, Mark Rosewater, has often described three types of players: Tammy, who values experience (think: *Shadow Of The Colossus* or *Thumper*); Spike, who values expertise (think: *Street Fighter* or *Drop7*), and Jenny, who values expression (think: *Facade* or *Deus Ex*). These player archetypes are often discussed in board-game circles but rarely when it comes to computer games. Luckily, these are easily looked up on the internet.

Now I've always loved the elegance of this triad, and have given it much thought over the years. One thing I keep finding myself busy with is if there should be a hierarchy between them. In my own experience, expression is the highest form of play, with experience the lowest (and naturally, most popular). I can also defend this rationally by arguing that experience is easily found in other media, although a sense of 'being there' is only easily mass produced in digital forms. Expertise is something best practiced in games, due to them being safe to experiment in, but this attitude rarely focuses on anything but the game's rules. And expression would be the highest, as it not only has you interacting with the rules of the game, it can also have one interacting with the joys and the sores of reality. Notice how only the best manage to juggle all these: *Dark Souls*, *Zelda*, *WOW* and *Super Metroid*.

Years ago, **Edge** once boldly stated that they always choose gameplay over graphics. Reading that as a kid meant a lot to me. Twenty years later, I'm still curious as to what my favourite magazine considers valuable in games. Perhaps this triad is the ideal dichotomy; perhaps **Edge** has an even better one. So what I'm asking is, where does **Edge** actually stand?
Robert August de Meijer

Heavens above, Robert, isn't a bit early in the day for this? As far as we 're concerned, there's only one type that matters: the one that reads **Edge**. Enjoy your PS Plus sub, and please stop asking such difficult questions.

Free kick

I'm certain much has been and will be said about how fantastic an experience *Breath Of The Wild* is in singleplayer, but it turns out it's a fantastic multiplayer experience too. At a recent StreetPass event (thankfully despite the Switch not having it, Nintendo is still supporting the community) many of us had our Switches and *Zelda*. We had two projector screens and two docks. On one we had the various games of that event's tournament, the other was for *Zelda*.

I created another profile on my Switch for new players to get a chance to explore the Great Plateau, but we also switched consoles frequently so people could show off the new things they'd found.

Watching someone else play and pointing out things in the distance was great. We found a labyrinth in the desert, one of the dragons and a bunch of shrines. It was easy to swap back and forth between players with the dock, so everyone got to join in.

I've seen a lot of people worried about spoilers for *Breath Of The Wild*, but I've been only too happy to learn of other people's discoveries then look for them myself. Spoilers in *Breath Of The Wild* feel more like travel guides to get the best out of my holiday – and, like most holidays, it's more fun if you don't go alone.
John Edwards

It's a rare game that feels so immune to spoilers. Just as well, really, because it's all anyone round here wants to talk about.

Full time

The delightful severity with which the top end of the year has filled with startlingly good games that beg to be experienced has been astonishing. *Resident Evil 7*, *Horizon Zero Dawn* and now *Persona 5*: these titles sing to me. I am also the proud owner of a neon Switch, loaded with *Zelda*, *Snake Pass*, *Snipperclips* and *I Am Setsuna*.

Yet I am dejected. I am a mature student in my final term of computer science, undergoing continuous assessment from lecturers and trying to complete my thesis on the application of agile methodologies in software development.

I have no time. I knew this term would be busy, but not to this degree. I have managed about five hours of gameplay in *Zelda*. Five! I'm stunned to hear of people on second and third playthroughs when I have yet to carry the blue flame to the sodding furnace! Or save the rupees for registering a horse.

I don't begin my job as a demo engineer until mid-August, so my last summer off bodes well for my back catalogue. There's something inherently wistful, even in your 30s, about daytime gaming. For those of us who aren't privy to this as a career it's a joy.
Owen Grogan

Hey, this job isn't just about playing games all day, you know. There are also bribes to collect and nefarious sociopolitical agendas to subtly advance. Still, best of luck with the final push. We hope a summer off is worth the effort, and definitely aren't jealous.

Highlights

We forgot to send you an email last week about film night, so just in case you have a look at your emails today here is a reminder that we are showing My Old Lady starring Maggie Smith.
Slim

Of course we'll be there! And probably for the next few after that, since we doubt our spam filter's getting fixed any time soon. ■



STEVEN POOLE

Trigger Happy

Shoot first, ask questions later

The American philosopher Thomas Nagel posed a famous question in 1979: "What is it like to be a bat?" The question makes sense because we assume bats have some level of awareness, of conscious experience. And, Nagel writes, "The fact that an organism has conscious experience at all means, basically, that there is something it is like to be that organism." The problem is that this something-it-is-likeness cannot be captured purely by objective scientific measurement. You could in principle map a bat's entire brain and nervous system and understand down to the quantum level what is going on in the neurons, but you still wouldn't know what it's like to be that bat. That, Nagel says, is the nub of the whole mind-body problem in philosophy.

I haven't yet been a bat in David OReilly's game *Everything*, but I have been ladybugs, pine trees, spiral galaxies, atoms of argon, and hundreds of other things. At one point the game allows you to morph instantly into any type of thing or being you have already encountered, and, says the help text, "feel what it's like to be them again". Except I don't. I don't really feel what it's like to be a grey horse, even as I can whinny and lovingly join up into a herd while square-rolling my way around the endless pastures. Nagel's challenge remains defiantly unresolved.

Given this inevitable limitation, a cynic might suppose that *Everything* is just another piece of artgame thinkpiece-bait. And yet its aesthetic and philosophical choices do add up to something refreshingly new. That deliberate form of anti-animation itself, for example, is a thing of unexpected beauty, a thoughtfully stylised response to resource limitations. Don't we all sometimes feel like we're tumbling end-over-end through life in this way? "I can never really tell how I'm doing at this," says a rock early on – just like a player in *Everything*, and just like a human.

I said "thing or being" earlier, but *Everything* wants us to abandon that distinction itself. This game is a procedural argument for the truth of panpsychism: the philosophical view that consciousness is a fundamental property of all matter, not something confined to the higher animals. Therefore all things are beings too. That is why rocks and clods of earth, as well as stars, have thoughts in the game. As a tree thinks early on, "Everything sings!" The game also ties into other holistic strains of contemporary science: it evidently chimes, for example, with the views of the German forester Peter Wohlleben, who has had a surprise bestseller with a book called The Secret Life Of Trees, arguing that trees communicate and co-operate with one another in a vast "woodwide web".

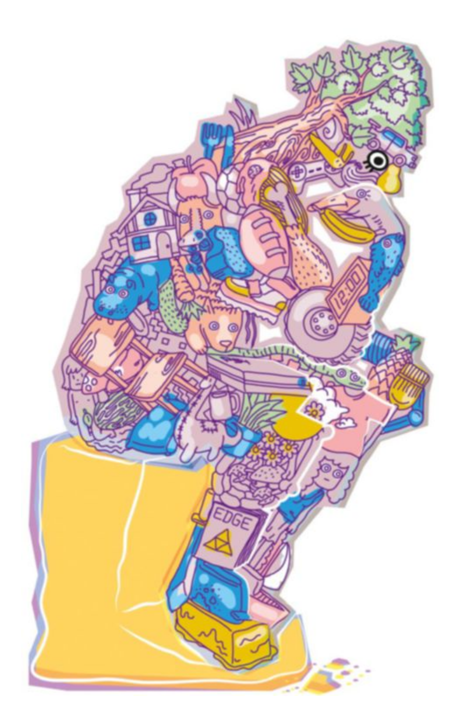


Illustration **kaeru.com.ar**

I don't really feel what it's like to be a grey horse, even as I can whinny and lovingly join up into a herd

The game's explicit philosophical content comes in the form of snippets of talks from the British philosopher Alan Watts (1915-1973), an interesting guy who was an Anglican priest, a psychedelic experimenter and friend to Aldous Huxley, an early eco-campaigner, and a populariser of Zen Buddhism in the west. These clips are rather reminiscent of Dustin Hoffman's character in I Heart Huckabees, kindly explaining that we are not separate from one another but all part of the same blanket. But lest a player be inclined to dismiss all this as hippy Orientalism, it should be noted that the same ideas have popped up everywhere in the history of philosophy. *Everything*'s Wattian view is very similar to that of the maverick genius Baruch Spinoza, a 17th-century Dutch philosopher and lens grinder, who argued not only that what we perceive as separate things are really parts of a whole; what we think are separate minds are just different aspects of the single mind of the God-universe.

A philosophical idea can be exciting and beautiful even if you don't really buy it, and *Everything* remains a richer and deeper experience than just a tech-demo for a way of gamifying philosophy lectures. A decision as simple as using the action button for the verb "to think" points towards new possibilities for the form, even if they aren't fully realised here. In that spirit the game reminded me most not of other modern indie games but of Automata's *Deus Ex Machina*.

Watts once described himself to some sceptical Californian students as a "philosophical entertainer", and *Everything* makes a wonderfully unabashed case for the videogame itself as philosophical entertainment. The one question it leaves the exhilarated player with is that deepest cosmological conundrum of all. Why is there everything rather than nothing?

Steven Poole's Trigger Happy 2.0 is now available from Amazon. Visit him online at www.stevenpoole.net



NATHAN BROWN

Big Picture Mode

Industry issues given the widescreen treatment

My YouTube recommendations are an absolute mess. Being a parent certainly doesn't help – in and amongst the ripped jungle 12-inches and archived livestreams of *Street Fighter* tournaments are Peppa Pig marathons, Raa Raa The Noisy Lion compilations and all the rest of it. But even if I were still childless, I suspect that Recommended tab would still be in a right old state.

Part of the problem, it appears, is the algorithm's habit for mistaking one's morbid curiosity about some YouTube phenomenon as their desire to never again watch anything else. A while back someone on Twitter linked to one of those videos of an irritatingly well-off young man opening 50 quid's worth of FIFA Ultimate Team packs. I lasted about two minutes, but for the next fortnight my YouTube dashboard was a wall of thumbnails of gurning kids next to a picture of some 85-rated left back from Ligue 1. Just last night the home screen of my Shield TV suggested I watch a video of YouTube starlet Zoella going through an absurd haul from a trip to Primark. I lasted for as long as it took for her to proclaim the Bristol branch as one of the greatest places on Earth; I have been there, and am quite sure it is the unofficial tenth circle of Hell. Today I'm too scared to load up YouTube to find out how the algorithm has interpreted it.

When YouTube decides to put this stuff in front of me, however, I at least know how it got there. It's the suggestions out of the blue that unsettle me more. It persistently recommends, for instance, compilations of Twitch Fails, with generously cleavaged gamer girls in the thumbnail. I've never clicked on one, though I assume they're full of people falling off chairs, furiously ragequitting or getting swatted, and perhaps all at the same time. Yet still, they keep coming. Clearly, part of that is because my activity on YouTube is largely related to videogames. Yet it's also no doubt because, whatever our interests, we all love to see a good fuck-up. For all that I'm frustrated by the way the biggest video-sharing website on the planet seems content to put so much miserable dreck in front of me, I can't complain too much about this. I do love seeing someone fall off a chair.

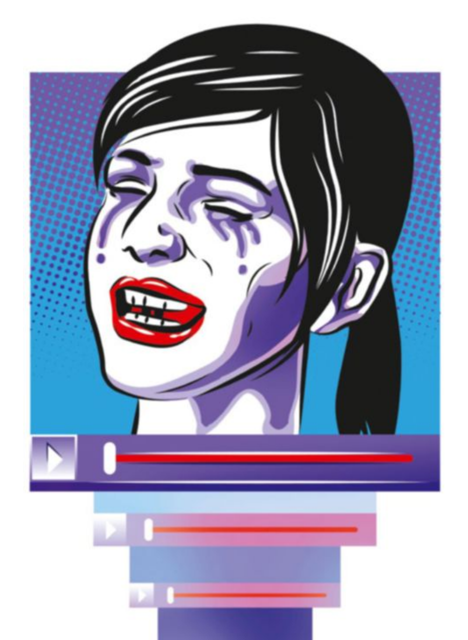


Illustration kaeru.com.ar

> Every time we chuckle at a horse falling through the floor, the quality of discourse around games lowers further

All of which presumably explains why, recently, YouTube's Recommended sidebar has been plastered with wacky compilations of unfortunate moments of animation in *Mass Effect Andromeda*. It's not just low-grade opportunists looking for a ride on a meme-worthy bandwagon, either. I clicked on one (subtitled 'DOES IT SUCK?') and found it was the work of a pretty pro-looking outfit with 1.5 million subscribers. It seems that not even channels with a swanky studio setup and a few million in VC funding are above showing clips of space marines who walk like they've shat themselves.

What really upsets me about this isn't that it exists, necessarily, but that there's an audience for it. Because every time we chuckle at a horse falling through the floor or an NPC's jaw rotating 360 degrees when you turn in a quest to them, the overall quality of discourse around videogames lowers even further. Reviewers who were in the process of playing *Andromeda* did their best to explain, vaguely so as not to break embargo, that the game improved after some torpid opening hours. Experienced animators weighed in to explain how it happened. But calmer voices were drowned out by laughter, and the narrative was set. Just as most players know *ME3* for the ludicrous fuss over its ending, so *Andromeda* will be known for its animation, and we all get a little dumber as a result.

I realise why it happens: we all love a good yuk, and when a long-awaited, big-budget, high-profile game suddenly looks like it might be a stinker, we instinctively pile on, because we all love a good scandal, too. In this instance, however, EA has only itself to blame. It set the review embargo for the day before release, knowing that a much wider (and much less patient) audience, through EA Access, would get ten hours with the game a week ahead of launch. It surely realised the animation was far from best in class. It also knew – or should have known – that *Andromeda*'s first ten hours didn't flatter the whole. EA, like many other companies, is now able to speak directly to its players, mitigating the risk of a critical press putting would-be customers off a purchase. Here, however, we could have reassured them. After all, not all recommendations have to be produced by a computer, you know.

Nathan Brown is Edge's editor. If you enjoyed this page, you might also like Official Xbox Magazine, PC Gamer, and Razzle

#306

H Y P E

THE GAMES IN OUR SIGHTS THIS MONTH



Explore the iPad edition of **Edge** for extra Hype content

Palette cleanser

Not so long ago, everything was brown. The 360 and PS3 era was not, by and large, the best for fans of a broad colour palette: whether you choose to blame the widespread use of Unreal Engine 3, the popularity of the FPS, or something else entirely, the fact remains that we spent much of the first decade of the new millennium pining for a little splash of colour.

It says much for the industry's current trajectory that, for the second time this year, we're struck by a sudden chromatic explosion in the Hype section, faced with another selection of previews defined by bright, bold hues.

Splatoon 2 (p30) has, like its predecessor, colour by the bucketload, since it's a game about painting a multiplayer map with as much of your team's assigned pigment as possible. Nintendo may be one of the few remaining companies in the industry for whom vibrant tones are the rule, rather than the exception, but *Splatoon 2*, like its predecessor, goes a step further. Here, colour is not merely an aesthetic, but also a mechanic. That wouldn't have got past the suits in 2007.

The Surge (p38) couldn't be further in tone from Nintendo's breezy shooter, but this intriguing sci-fi spin on the *Souls* formula favours royal blues, rusty burnt oranges and wet, mossy greens over the usual brown and grey shooter uniform.

Volition is another studio that prefers the garish end of the spectrum, what with the fluoro purple of the latter-day *Saints Row* games, and the cheery character-customisation tools that had us running around *SRIV*'s open world in a turquoise wig and shocking-pink leotard. The studio's latest effort, *Agents Of Mayhem* (p34) – despite its lore connection to *Saints Row* and its stylised, '90s-cartoon visuals – may not be all muddy greys and browns, but in the hands, as it is on the eyes, it's as uninspired as any mid-2000s cookie-cutter shooter. It's a timely reminder that colour alone does not guarantee a game a personality.

MOST WANTED

Destiny 2 PC, PS4, Xbox One
The announcement trailers may not have given much away, but they didn't need to. Mere confirmation of the game's arrival this year – and of Luke Smith and Mark Noseworthy being in charge – was all we needed. Hurry up, September.

Rime PC, PS4, Switch, Xbox One
We're still half-expecting something to go horribly wrong with Tequila Works' long-awaited island adventure, but it seems like it's actually going to happen this time. Review next month, unless something goes wrong, in which case expect another cover story in a couple of years.

Tekken 7 PC, PS4, Xbox One
If including Akuma wasn't already enough of an eyelash-flutter from Bandai Namco to hardened *Street Fighter* players, it's only gone and made him one of the most powerful characters in the game. Apologies in advance to those that run into us online: we plan on using every dirty trick of his in the book.



SPLATOON 2

Can Nintendo's quick-fire sequel make an even bigger splash?

Developer/publisher Nintendo (EPD)
Format Switch
Origin Japan
Release Summer

Splatoon was the biggest triumph of a troubled era – or, perhaps, the right game on the wrong console. By embracing Wii U's eccentricities it found an audience, particularly in Japan, where it enjoyed an attach rate of 45 per cent. Nevertheless, the commercial struggles of its host hardware prevented a brilliant game from becoming an even bigger hit. A sequel on Switch, in theory, offers an opportunity to correct that issue, but brings with it additional pressures. This is, by Nintendo standards, a quick-fire follow-up, only two years on from the original. And this time, the surprise factor is gone. How, then, does a series that encouraged us to 'stay fresh' continue to do just that?

That burden falls on the shoulders of producer **Hisashi Nogami**, who admits he couldn't have foreseen the original's remarkable success. Its performance in Japan was particularly surprising, since multiplayer shooters aren't nearly as popular as in the west. But this was a game defined more by its differences to its peers than its similarities. That's because, Nogami tells us, his team didn't actually set out to make a shooter. "We felt that one of the biggest reasons so many people played *Splatoon* was because even at a glance it looked like a lot of fun," he tells us. "Even just watching over someone's shoulder, looking at the screen while they play, you can tell what's going on and know what you need to do. It makes you want to reach out your hand and tell them to give you a turn."

Word of mouth kept *Splatoon* in the Japanese software charts for some time, with Nogami suggesting that many players were inspired by videos posted by early adopters. "But of course, the real fun of *Splatoon* comes once you start," he says. "It makes you want to get better and to become a stronger player. I think that's why so many players enjoyed the game." And its popularity has spread well beyond the traditional online-shooter fanbase. "We've heard from people saying they've never been so engaged in a game since their childhood. We've even heard from parents who told us they started playing after seeing their child play and became hooked."

Still, there's an unspoken acknowledgement that *Splatoon 2* is an opportunity to reach a wider audience, and Switch's strong start suggests it's likely to succeed. But Nintendo's conscious decision not to reveal too much of the game so far has raised questions over whether it justifies its status as a sequel, rather than an enhanced version of the original, similar to *Mario Kart 8 Deluxe*. The publisher's reticence, Nogami explains, is simple: his team is in the middle of development, and the release date is a little ▶



Splatoon 2 **producer Hisashi Nogami also directed the first three** ***Animal Crossing*** **games**



Players using Splat Dualies can evade twice in quick succession, but after the second dodge there's a brief cooldown window to prevent its overuse





New game, new hub. The original Plaza is replaced by Inkopolis Square as the Inklings' hangout. One new addition is an assistant for back-alley trader Spyke, who will remove abilities from your gear for a fee

way off yet. "We also don't want to go ham-fistedly giving out new information only to cause confusion," he adds. "Instead we'd like to introduce things one by one, once we're in a position to be able to properly convey them."

Indeed, for Nogami, seeing the game steadily grow in the weeks and months after launch was a key factor in *Splatoon*'s long-term appeal. "In this new game, players will again be able to enjoy seeing the game grow and expand over time, while having fun with the new weapons and special weapons as well as the new modes and play styles," he says, insisting, "There's plenty of value even for people who had the last game."

Some old maps will be returning with new features, including sniper haven Moray Towers, but there are at least four new ones, of which two were showcased during March's Global Testfire. It was a typically Nintendo kind of online beta, spread across six hour-long slots but the results were very promising. Both Musselforge Fitness and The Reef are compact maps, lacking obvious gimmicks, but that only makes them ideal as introductory stages. A third stage is set at a gig venue, while another takes place on a BMX track: these more unorthodox maps are the other side of the coin.

> ***"Players will again be able to enjoy seeing the game grow and expand over time"***



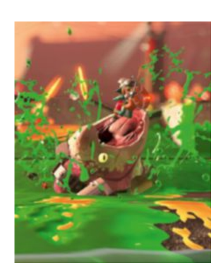
Nogami promises players "a lot of diverse weapons", but just one main one's been shown so far. The Splat Dualies are lightweight twin pistols that give your Inkling some extra manoeuvrability, courtesy of a dodge, which lets you leap forward to close the distance to an opponent, or to sidestep incoming ink. Its sub-weapon is an explosive curling stone that bounces off walls, letting you duck behind cover and angle shots around the corner to detonate or flush out entrenched opponents. Fill your special meter, meanwhile, and you can activate a jetpack that lets you hover above the arena, firing globs of ink from range.

There are subtle differences to familiar weapons, too. Charger weapons now let you hold that burst of pent-up ink while submerged, letting you pop up and quickly release a powerful shot. Rollers now flick vertically mid-jump, the ink spread narrower but over greater distance. Its special is an area-of-effect attack with a wide radius, but your Inkling is briefly vulnerable in the second before they splash down. The Splattershot remains a fine all-rounder; this time, it's bolstered by a pair of missile launchers, which auto-target anyone caught within their large reticle, though projectiles are easily avoided if you watch their shadows on approach.

Another, more significant change is less of a problem than you might think. Pressing X to bring up the map only causes a few issues at first, because our muscle memory from the original (and more recently *Zelda*) means we keep confusing it with the jump button. After a brief adjustment period, we no longer miss glancing down at the GamePad display for a top-down overview, since D-pad shortcuts let you quickly leap to your allies' aid or retreat to the spawn point.

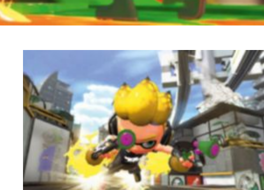
With no disconnections during any of our sessions, and almost no noticeable lag, the Testfire suggests Nintendo might have – fingers crossed – solved the original's netcode issues. Though with just two maps, one brand-new main weapon and a single game type, we're left with as many questions as answers. Happily, Nogami is able to answer some of them, including the reason behind the team's decision to limit the map rotation to two at a time. "We feel that part of the gameplay is actually selecting which weapons would be best for that combination of two maps," he explains. "In *Splatoon 2*, the maps rotate every two hours, so it'll be a much faster cycle than the previous game."

After teasing the new wave-based co-op mode Salmon Run (see 'Leap skills') and a singleplayer campaign called Hero Mode, Nogami cheerfully reiterates his earlier message: "Once we're in a position to give more information about it, we'll be sure to let you know!" The slow drip of details might be frustrating, but Nogami and his team have earned the benefit of the doubt so far. And, we concede, it's one way to preserve that crucial element of surprise. ■



Leap skills

A new game type called Salmon Run sees a squad of Inklings wearing chest waders battling waves of oversized fish to recover Power Eggs – as you do – with rewards dependent on the number they collect. It's a Horde mode with a Nintendo twist, though Nogami's explanation that "the higher the player's skill level, the more difficult the missions they can challenge themselves to" suggests it isn't endless. Two to four players can link up their Switches to play locally, while online you'll form teams of four. "The Inklings already work so well as action characters that we felt there was the possibility of further broadening *Splatoon*'s scope as an action game," Nogami elaborates. "We also wanted to add depth to the world that the Inklings inhabit. We developed Salmon Run with both of those aims in mind."





TOP **The basic enemies in Salmon Run might look more goofy than scary, but the larger variants make for imposing opponents.**
ABOVE **As well as a wide selection of new gear, Inklings now come with a range of different hairstyles.**
MAIN **Readability has been improved in several subtle ways: notably, the direction a roller is facing is indicated by a series of thin chevrons**

TOP **The squid icons at the top of the screen now show loadouts, while gear and perks for each Inkling are displayed alongside the map, giving you a clearer picture of your opponents' various strengths and weaknesses.**
RIGHT **It might look similar to its predecessor, but *Splatoon 2* boasts a number of visual improvements (superior lighting being one example) that become more apparent as you play**



The agents are fighting against Legion, a terrorist organisation with access to advanced dark matter technology. All of which is to say it's pretty futuristic

HYPE

AGENTS OF MAYHEM

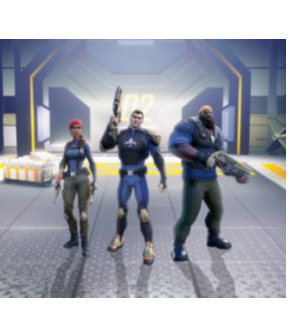
Volition returns to the open world, but leaves the Saints behind

Developer	Volition
Publisher	Deep Silver
Format	PC, PS4, Xbox One
Origin	US
Release	August 18





AGENTS OF MAYHEM



Each of the characters has a different moveset. All can triple jump, but some are faster than others, and some – like Hollywood – can dash in mid-air, which is useful for traversing the open world, as well as in combat

You can pinpoint the exact moment the *Saints Row* series redefined itself. Once barely more than a *GTA* clone, *Saints Row: The Third* saw Volition swap gangbanging for a frequently silly satire on celebrity culture and violence. In the opening mission, The Boss jumped out of a helicopter towards a penthouse full of corporate goons, backed by Power – Kanye West's ironic ode to fame and notoriety. The new direction was brash, confident and revelled in excess. It felt *right*. Skip forward to *Saints Row IV*, and The Boss was the President of the USA, fighting aliens in VR after the destruction of Earth. After that, Volition was always going to have an escalation problem. Hence *Agents Of Mayhem*. There's a canonical link if you want one, but *Agents Of Mayhem* isn't *Saints Row*. This is, after all, a game in which no one man *does* have all that power. Instead, your potential abilities are spread across 12 characters.

Agents Of Mayhem invites a *Saints Row* comparison – a parallel-universe version of one of the Saints is part of your Mayhem roster – but it isn't altogether favourable. It's an open-world shooter, set in a futuristic version of Seoul, starring a plethora of foul-mouthed antiheroes. There's Hollywood, the explosion-obsessed action-movie star; Hardtack, a shotgun-wielding sailor (who refers to himself in the thirdperson); Fortune, a fast, dual-pistol-carrying pirate with a drone; and many more besides. For each mission, you pick three Mayhem agents, and can switch between them instantaneously. Switch, and the character you were controlling disappears, the new one appearing in their place. This makes less sense than having a squad that's present at all times, but has the advantage that a character's health and shield recharge when they're not in use.

> ***There's a canonical link if you want one, but Agents Of Mayhem isn't Saints Row***

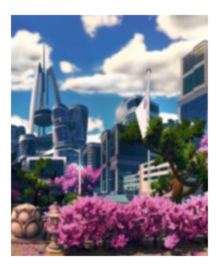


There's a tactical application here: a character's weapon might be more effective at close, medium or long range, for instance, or be more effective against an enemy's shield, armour or health. Whittle down a shield with one character, and you can switch to another to finish them off. Or you can begin a sortie at long range, and switch as enemies close the gap. A decent idea in theory, it works in practice, too, and allows for a degree of theorycrafting – but it doesn't feel very exciting. This is a new game from the studio that gave players a dubstep gun and ludicrous superpowers, but nothing we experience here feels so audacious or surprising. Weapons are sci-fi versions of a standard arsenal: shotguns, assault rifles, pistols and miniguns. Abilities feel more focused around dealing area-of-effect damage or applying status effects.

The absurd elements are there, but never allowed to run wild. You can triple-jump, but moving around the world feels less exciting than, for instance, *Sunset Overdrive* (or even *Saints Row IV*). The combat system is more meaty than your standard open-world game, but it's no *Borderlands* or *Mass Effect*, despite offering similar RPG shooter systems. At least there's potential in the upgradeable skills. One grants the chance to spawn an explosive clay rabbit when an enemy dies. That's pretty ridiculous, and all the better for it.

If our demo is any guide, there's no real hook to the systems. This is a collection of familiar ideas, reworked into a colourful, cartoon wrapping. Similarly, none of the characters jump out as distinct during the unordered hodge-podge of missions and sidequests we play, but some are at least likeable. Each agent has a couple of personal missions that flesh out their backstory, and mid-mission banter will fill you in on their specific relationships. Our early favourite is Daisy, a tattooed rollerskater, and a specialist, we're told, in "fighting and fucking". Her recruitment mission is told through hungover flashbacks. Later, she butts in on comms during another character's personal mission for no other reason than she's a bit lonely, and wants to see how everyone's doing.

Hopefully Volition will focus on such dynamics and situations. In isolation, it's easy to imagine *Saints Row*'s tone feeling unbearable, but its absurd excess was tempered by the genuine heart shown by your crew in their interactions with each other. It took multiple games, but the archetypes became characters. If Volition can keep that momentum going, it now has a much broader palette to work with. *Agents Of Mayhem* will need it; so far, it's showing a worrying lack of identity. ■



Latter-day Saints

Despite not being a *Saints Row* game, *Agents Of Mayhem* contains threads that link back to Volition's previous series. Arguably it's a reboot, but only if you're willing to take *Saints Row* seriously enough to pretend it ever had coherent lore. In one of the endings of the miserable *Saints Row IV* spin-off *Gat Out Of Hell*, Johnny Gat asked God to reboot the universe. *Agents Of Mayhem* is that universe. The Saints you remember still exist here, but they're not the people they were before. Pierce Washington, a major character in the *Saints Row* series, appears here as an agent. It's an alternate take on the same personality; expect his personal missions to have lots of nods to Volition's previous games.



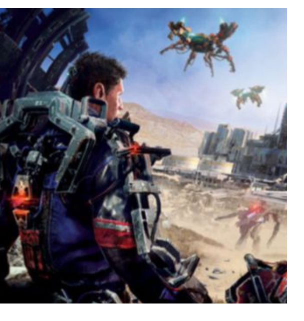
TOP Elite enemies have both shields and armour, which favours certain agents over others. Picking a well-rounded squad can offer the advantage. RIGHT Daisy may be our initial pick of the litter, but it's hard to judge the writing based on only a few hours of play. Hopefully the tone will cement into something more consistent later on

TOP The combat system allows for synergy between abilities. Fortune's drone can briefly stun enemies, a perfect set-up for a more powerful close-range specialist such as Hardtack. ABOVE Special missions let you take on specific Legion characters. Hammersmith's mission opens with you driving to his base as he fires a deadly space laser at your car. MAIN Every weapon we've seen so far fits a pretty standard template, but skill upgrades give your characters more ridiculous abilities

Developer Deck13 Interactive
Publisher Focus Home Interactive
Format PC, PS4, Xbox One
Origin Germany
Release May 16







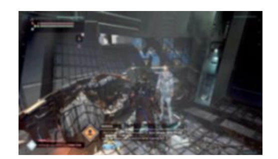
THE SURGE

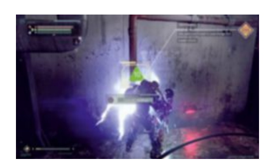
Deck13's robots might not have souls, but they're far from soulless

Lords Of The Fallen may have been heavily indebted to *Demon's Souls*, but it built on From Software's formula in a number of memorable ways. The best of these was the introduction of a multiplier that saw the potential XP you could reap from fallen foes increase the longer you resisted saving at a checkpoint. It was such a good idea, in fact, that we can't help but feel disappointed by its absence from *The Surge*.

That's not to say the studio's sci-fi twist on the *Souls* template doesn't have plenty of new ideas, however. Here, XP becomes scrap metal – collected from fallen enemies as well as crates and dark corners – which you use to upgrade your rig and build new weapons and equipment. Predictably, if you die you'll leave a pile of your accrued junk at the location of your demise and must return to the spot to collect it, without dying again in the process. But here there is also a two-and-a-half-minute time limit, after which your misplaced stockpile will disappear – though it can be extended by a few seconds with every successful kill. It's a smart mechanic that can pressure you into rash decisions en route if you're not careful, especially given that there are no regular checkpoints in the large section we play, just a central operations centre in which to save your progress.

There's further risk and reward built into the mechanics of the game's combat. Once locked on to an enemy, you can target their limbs, head or torso. Striking unprotected body parts will inflict more damage, and have a greater chance of staggering your opponent. It's a guaranteed way to end a low-level-enemy encounter quickly, but you'll only walk away from the fight with a handful of scrap. If a particular piece of armour or a weapon that

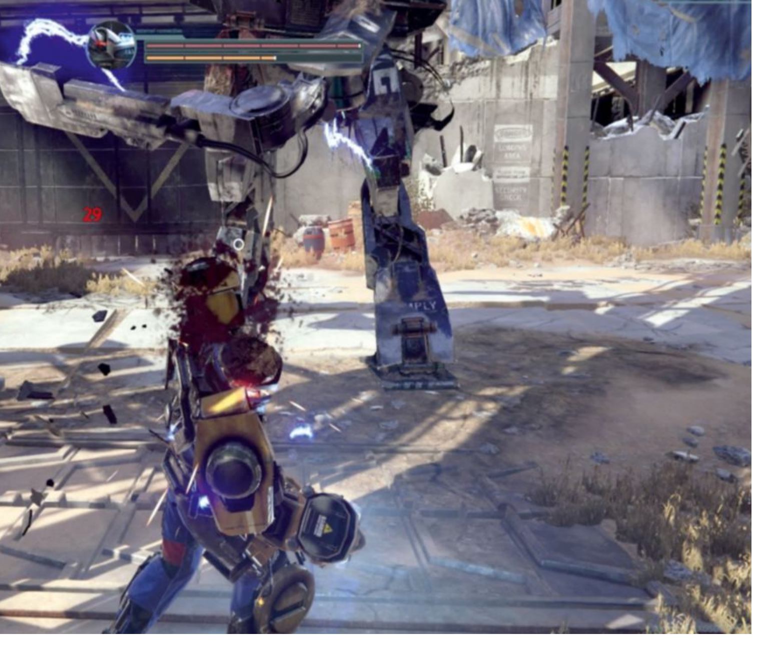




ABOVE **You make contact with a CREO executive early on, who offers to help you. We'd rather go it alone than endure any more of the game's voice acting**

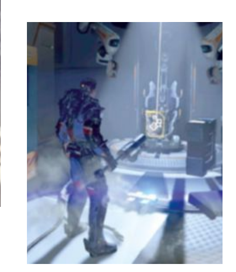
Melee kills sometimes play out in slow motion, showing off all of the grisly detail





LEFT **This security-robot boss attacks with plasma cutters, stamping and kicking feet, and a barrage of rockets. Taking cover underneath it when the projectiles hit puts it out of commission briefly.**
BELOW **We've yet to find any guns, but have come across various saws, cutters and pipes. Combat is brutal**





they own takes your fancy, however, you'll need to focus on the relevant, better-protected part of your opponent. This means prolonging the fight as you try to wear them down to the point that you're able to sever a limb and collect the now-wrecked piece of kit.

Doing so unlocks a schematic for a less dented version of the tech, which you can then build back at the operations centre in exchange for scrap and some specific rare parts. Every piece of armour – which will offer varying amounts of defence against elemental, slash, thrust and crush attacks – and weaponry can also be upgraded through four stages, each one costing additional resources. Protagonist Warren builds a performance-enhancing affinity with each piece of kit the more you use it, as in *Nioh*.

Despite the weight of the metal machinery adorning Warren and the game's enemies, combat feels pleasantly snappy. Rather than heavy or light attacks, the right shoulder buttons are mapped to vertical and horizontal swipes. While the vertical strike still feels like the heavy option, taking longer to wind up and dealing a little more damage in most cases, you'll still need to pay attention to the direction of your swings to maximise their effectiveness – a vertical strike to the head is better than a horizontal one, for example.

Warren will chain moves together as you tap the two buttons to form basic combos – a punch, followed by two hits from the elbow before a spinning kick, say – and when enough damage has been done to a particular area you'll be prompted to hold a button to trigger a special attack. While these are primarily there to allow you to sever limbs and net some loot, they also function as finishing moves, which you can use to your advantage to speed things along while farming for scrap. You're invincible for the duration of

Protagonist Warren builds a performance-enhancing affinity with each piece of kit

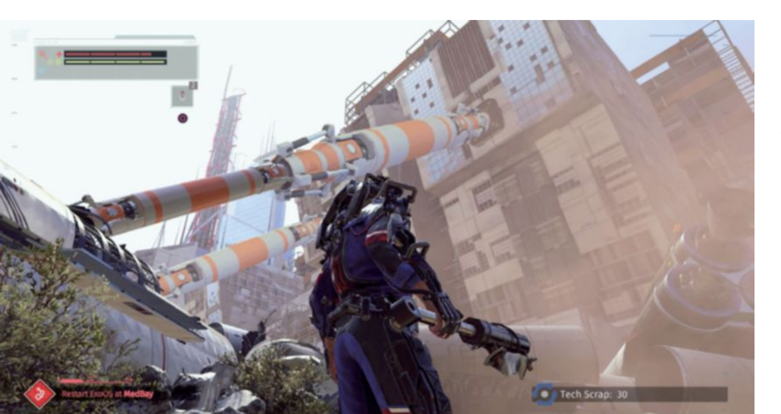
the move's animation, too, which makes it a particularly useful option when facing groups of enemies, like a *Dark Souls* backstab.

The Abandoned Production area we explore is mostly populated by former employees of scrapping company CREO, who now lumber about like robotic zombies in their exosuits. However, there are also a number of drones floating about, which deploy a variety of attacks – ranged laser beams, for instance, and a close-range EMP blast, which instantly drains your stamina bar, leaving you vulnerable – and two larger machines. The first of these is some kind of huge yellow digging unit, which promptly sits on us, fatally. We elect not to return. The second is a fast-moving, bipedal security droid which has featured in trailers for the game. Its long reach and ability to leap about the arena makes it a formidable combatant, and the fight serves as a clear demonstration of Deck13's belief that the term 'robotic combat' needn't mean clunky. ■

Core strength

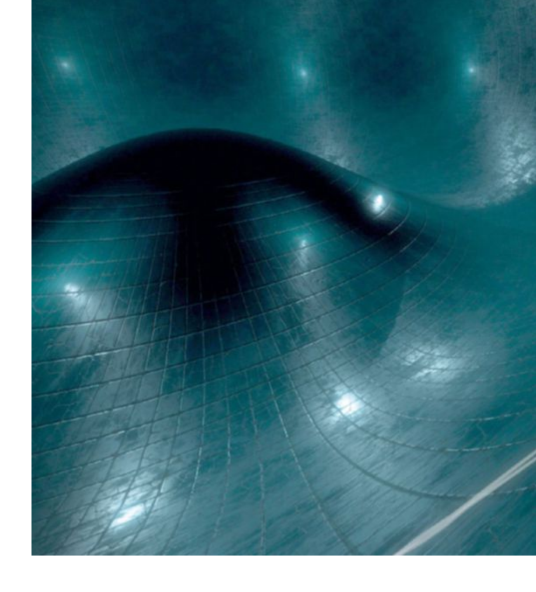
If nods to the *Souls* games and Team Ninja's *Nioh* aren't enough, perhaps we can interest you in an idea borrowed from *Nier: Automata*? The medbay in the ops centre allows you to upgrade your rig's core capacity using implants. You'll star with four slots, to be filled with various bits of kit such as devices that allow you to heal while out in the field, see enemy health, or increase your HP pool. Every implant drains power, however, so you'll also need to manage consumption. Raising the maximum capacity will open new implant slots (up to eight in our build) which should allow plenty of scope for customising the game around your playstyle.

The abandoned section of Creo's factory we explore is an imposing, but rather colourful construction





Developer/publisher Exbleative
Format PC
Origin Australia
Release TBA





EXO ONE

Tiny Wings, Journey and Kubrick collide in this sci-fi delight

During a test run that doubles as a tutorial, an experimental manned space probe called Exo One is pulled into a wormhole and lost forever. You take the role of the pilot of this doomed craft in a two-hour experience inspired by 2001: A Space Odyssey and Interstellar. Deposited on the surface of an alien world, you roll, leap and glide towards a huge alien installation on the horizon that projects a beam of blue light skywards. The beam propels you into another wormhole and, through it, another alien world – and then another, and another. The game's lone developer Jay Weston cites *Journey* as a key influence, and little wonder: *Exo One* builds a similarly evocative sense of travel out of simple parts.

The Exo One probe takes the form of a slick black sphere which you roll with the left analogue stick. Holding a button increases the effect of gravity on the sphere, causing you to slow down on flat surfaces or inclines but allowing you to pick up speed while rolling down a slope. Contact with the ground gradually builds up energy, which is represented by a diffused glow within the sphere itself. Energy can be expended to jump, including a double jump, and to flatten the sphere out into a disc in order to glide. The system rewards timing and good judgement with a sense of escalating momentum. Lean into a descent and you can both charge the probe and pick up speed before leaping at the apex of the next hill to shoot up into the air. Your task then is to find a suitable place to break your fall without sacrificing speed, which means finding a slope (ideally one roughly facing the direction of the next transport beam) and steering towards it. Yet mid-air control also slows you down, so the

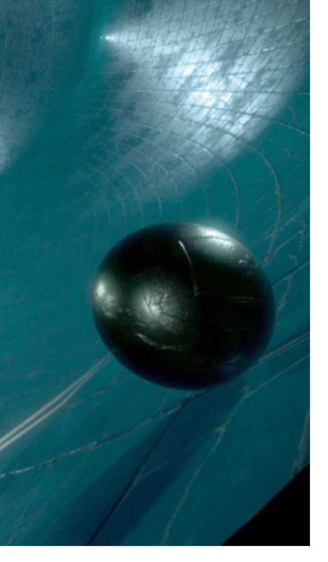


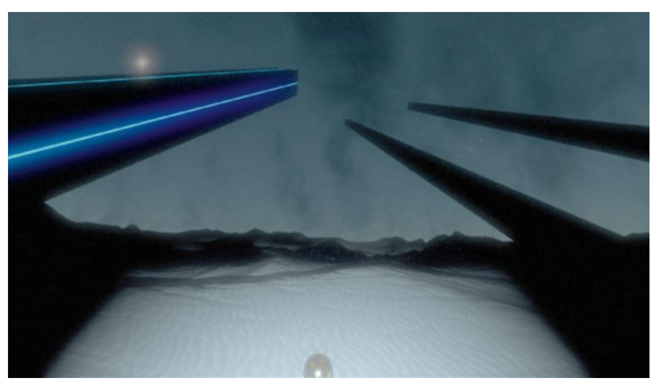


ABOVE **Environmental effects are key to *Exo One*'s sense of place. Rushing clouds, mist and rain evoke forbidding alien atmospheres. Distant monuments help to prevent you from getting lost in these vast landscapes**

Flattening Exo One into a disc allows you to sustain airtime, but slows you down. Depending on your approach, a series of gravity-enhanced leaps might be preferable







LEFT **Reaching each monolith propels you through another wormhole in a sequence straight out of 2001. During these jumps, the narrator provides additional context for the pilot's one-way journey**



TOP LEFT **Weston says he will likely rework the tutorial, which currently has you accelerating the probe to terminal velocity in an indoor testing area. *Exo One*'s most effective teaching takes place out in the world.**
ABOVE ***Exo One* is about a journey, but it isn't required that you undertake that journey as quickly as possible. Stopping to explore or to tinker with reactive environments is as much of a draw as the thrill of rapid movement**

trick is to move as little as possible – to avoid overthinking it, if you can.

***Tiny Wings* and** *Tribes* are important touchstones for *Exo One*, but both of those games used a movement system like this in a competitive context. *Tiny Wings* is a singleplayer race: failure, meaning loss of momentum, ends the game and your run. *Tribes* is traditionally a game of capture the flag, where understanding how to traverse each map as quickly as possible is the key to scoring points. *Exo One* takes away those stakes and in doing so reveals the meditative quality of these mechanics. You're playing with a ball, after all.

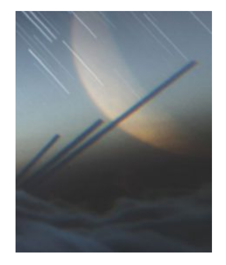
It's a natural fit for a game with *Journey*'s structure. Controlling the probe is involved enough to keep you engaged, but that engagement takes place in the deep mammalian part of your brain that has always liked rolling a ball around and probably always will. This frees up your other faculties to absorb everything else about *Exo One*, from its landscapes to its lighting, voiceover and sound design.

The introductory section of the game we play takes place over two words, each scattered with hills, ravines, shallow water, and looming alien obelisks. The final game will feature stranger places than these – gas giants and oceans are mentioned – but even in these terrestrial settings, *Exo One* looks phenomenal. Rolling terrain is enhanced by ground-level fog that rushes ahead of the probe, scattering the light of a low sun. Film grain connects the game to the sci-fi cinema that so clearly influences it, softening edges and helping to tie disparate parts into a single evocative image. Each environment is subtly reactive in ways that are intended to be

The system rewards timing and good judgement with a sense of escalating momentum

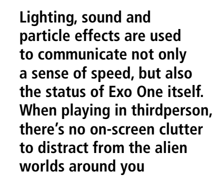
discovered as you play. Lightning, drawn to the probe as you steer through a storm, maxes out your energy meter for a short duration. Achieve enough height to break the cloud layer and elevated air currents can give you a boost of speed in glide mode. On the ground, clouds of glowing alien spores scatter as you approach.

Though manipulating these effects isn't necessary to progress, they're intended to reward experimentation and to provide each world with its own distinct character. This will be crucial when it comes to maintaining the game's pace: lacking a *Journey*-style multiplayer twist, inventive and interactive environments will be key to sustaining interest over that two-hour running time. *Exo One* is currently slated for release on PC, although Weston is considering other platforms if there's sufficient demand. Hopefully that'll prove to be the case: given its relaxed form of play and cinematic presentation, *Exo One* could find a welcoming home on console too. ■



In the cockpit

During one section of our demo, *Exo One* shifts to a firstperson view – an experiment on the part of the developer, for the time being, but one that suggests some of the other ways in which the game might try to surprise the player over the course of the story. A pilot's-eye view enhances the game's sense of momentum and places your focus squarely on those stunning environments, although control feels less precise than in thirdperson. It also necessitates the introduction of new UI elements to express the probe's energy level and shape, information that is easily expressed by Exo One itself when playing in thirdperson.



Lighting, sound and particle effects are used to communicate not only a sense of speed, but also the status of Exo One itself. When playing in thirdperson, there's no on-screen clutter to distract from the alien worlds around you



Developer/ publisher Noel Berry, Matt Thorson
Format PC, PS4, Switch
Origin Canada
Release 2017



CELESTE

Watch the mountain

The old woman's laughter follows you as you begin your ascent. It echoes from her lodge, halfway across one screen, stretching into the next before fading into the crisp night air. You've already come close to being crushed by a giant falling block of ice; she warns you that if you had trouble dealing with that, you may not be prepared for what's to come. You soon realise she isn't kidding. As you jog to your right, the thin stone bridge begins to crumble underfoot, so you break into a sprint, leaping over a gap, only for the stone you land on to fall away as you touch down. Time stands still as a crow suddenly flaps over to you and caws out an instruction; you follow it, pressing X to dash to safe ground. Phew.

You'll steel yourself for the task ahead, realising that this game wants to kill you

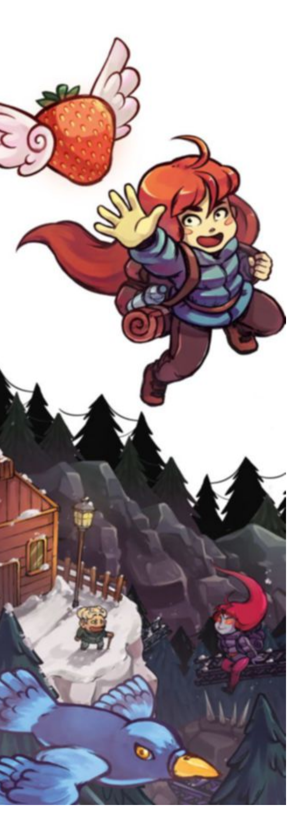
Celeste's opening is a masterclass in economy, not just introducing you to its controls, but to the kind of trial you can expect to face. The floating onomatopoeic text of the woman's laugh not only serves to mock protagonist Madeline's ambitions to climb the eponymous mountain, but acts as a provocation for the player, too, urging you to prove her wrong. Immediately, you'll steel yourself for the task ahead, realising that this is a game that wants to kill you, and often. We're not prepared to share our stats for the build we played; suffice it to say, it succeeded.

Much of the challenge comes not from the many spiked hazards, falling blocks and shifting platforms, but two key limitations. First, your mid-air dash ability is only replenished when you land, with Madeline's hair appearing blue once you've used it. And second, she's only capable of clinging to vertical surfaces for a limited time. Occasionally, the way forward looks obvious until you realise you only have a single dash to get through it. And Madeline's waning grip forces you to either climb or jump quickly rather than wait for the perfect moment.

Before long, you'll have a new factor to contend with, as Madeline activates a series of environmental anomalies that accelerate your momentum in the direction you're headed as you leap into them. This means being squished into the odd wall, until you work out the correct angle of approach. Later, via a cracked mirror, an evil alter ego appears, and then some more: they mimic Madeline's moves several seconds afterwards, much like *Super Mario Galaxy 2*'s Cosmic Clones. As long as you keep moving, they're relatively easily avoided – at least until your progress is halted by a moving platform that can only be triggered by collecting a token. This requires you to enter a cramped alcove and negotiate your exit before the evil doppelgängers can make contact.

If reaching the next zone is your main objective, an optional secondary goal proves all but irresistible. On some screens you'll see floating strawberries that tempt you away from the path of least resistance, usually requiring a tricky string of inputs to reach. And you can't simply sacrifice yourself by grabbing one during a death plunge: it'll only be added to your rucksack once you've touched down safely with the fruit in your possession. To further complicate matters, winged variants will flutter away if disturbed by a dash, forcing you to make your way to them without your failsafe.

It's a slow and often fraught climb, in other words, but you'll feel elated as much as relieved when you reach a new checkpoint. *Celeste* isn't, perhaps, as revelatory as co-creator Matt Thorson's *Towerfall*, but for those moments you haven't got three friends to hand, it presents a solitary challenge that gives you the satisfaction of conquering your own personal Everest. ■

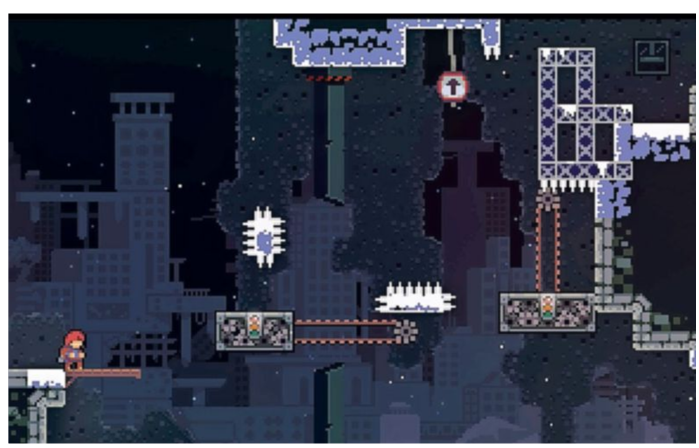


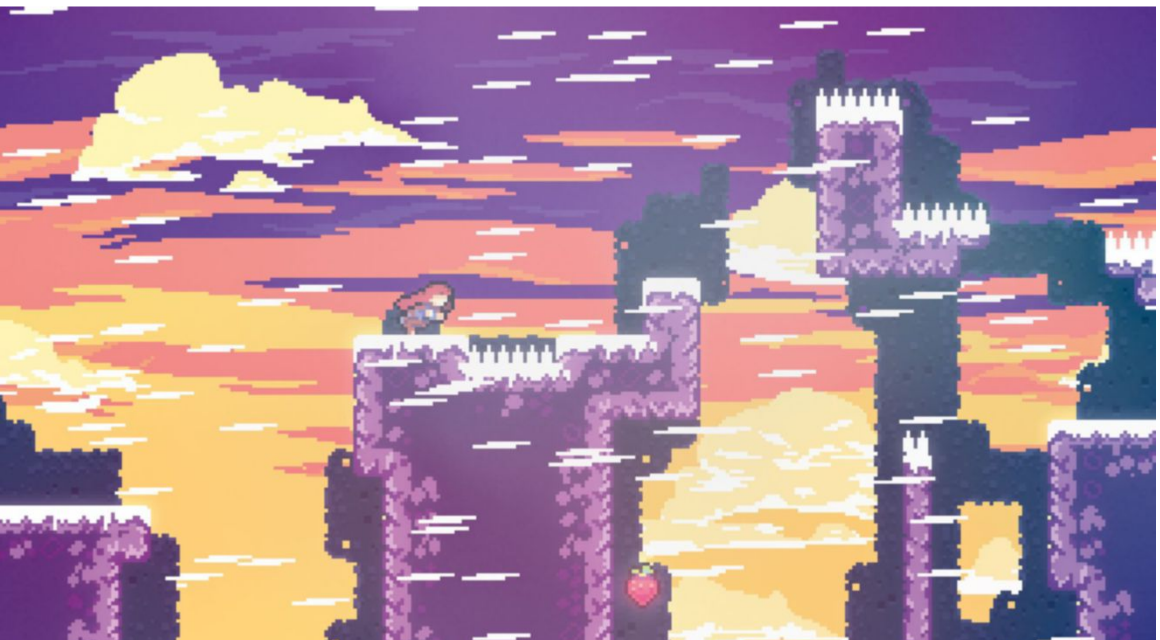


Peak performance

It's a chastening moment when we finish *Celeste*'s preview build and realise we've essentially been playing on Easy mode. Completing an area unlocks a remixed version of the stage, though 'remix' doesn't quite cover just how markedly different the layouts are. Here, you're forced to learn a new technique: once you've entered one of *Celeste*'s floating starfields (we're still not entirely sure how to refer to these peculiarities), you need to make a regular jump just as you exit, which sees your momentum carry you huge distances. And if that wasn't enough, you can also play the original version of the game, which was built over the course of a four-day game jam for the programmable virtual machine Pico-8.





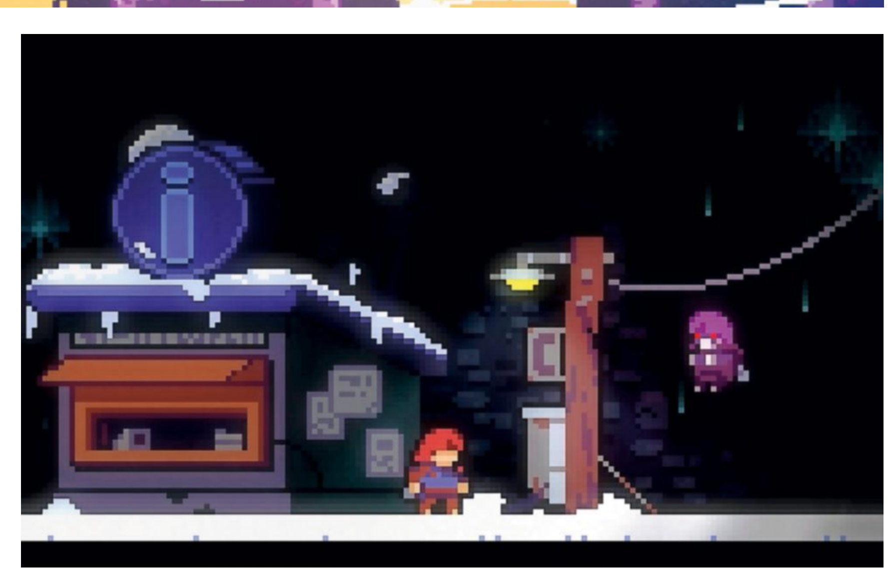






TOP **These platforms will move sharply as soon as you land on them or grab onto their side. You'll need to be ready to leap off quickly, but you can use their momentum to jump greater distances.** ABOVE **Green pickups will replenish your dash when collected, letting you chain jumps without having to touch down on solid ground.** MAIN ***Celeste*'s art might seem simple, but characters are well animated, and the action runs at an unblinking 60fps: that extra responsiveness is essential for the mountain's demanding challenges**

TOP **It turns out you're not truly alone on the mountain. This bearded fellow is Theo, who, rather suspiciously, seems to have set up camp on each stage. Still, he's a friendly enough sort, snapping a quick selfie with you before choosing a more flattering filter.** RIGHT **Dialogue exchanges are relatively short, offering a light dusting of mystery that gives you an extra incentive to keep climbing. Though as far as we're concerned, it's all about the strawberries**





VALKYRIA REVOLUTION

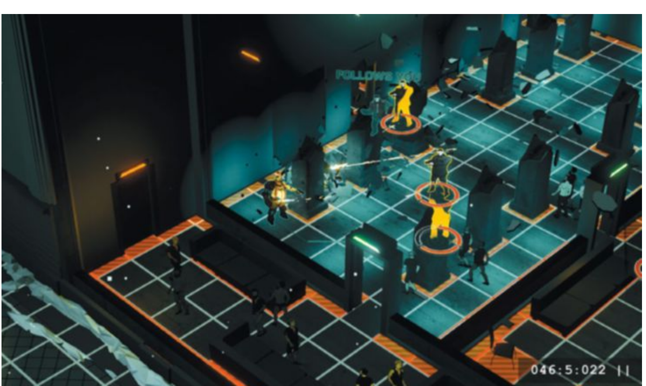
Dev Media Vision **Pub** Deep Silver (EU), Sega (JP, US) **Format** PS4, Vita, Xbox One **Origin** Japan **Release** Out now (JP), June (EU, US)



Valkyria Chronicles may now be considered a classic, but Sega has never quite managed to produce a follow-up worthy of the name. Set a century before events of the original game, _Revolution_ seems unlikely to reverse that trend: the reception to its Japanese launch could generously be described as lukewarm. Combat is now a hybrid of Active Time Battles and _Musou_-style action, while the first game's hand-sketched aesthetic has been replaced by a painterly look that seems compromised by its cross-platform development. Perhaps not the comeback we hoped for, then, but hey – at least we're getting this one.

ALL WALLS MUST FALL

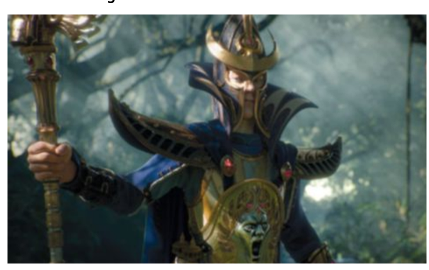
Developer/publisher Inbetweengames **Format** PC **Origin** Germany **Release** September



Set in an alternate future Berlin where the wall never came down, this isometric tactics game from three ex-Jager devs has _Syndicate_, _X-COM_ and a dash of _Invisible, Inc_ in its bones, and a pulsing techno rhythm in its veins. Each turn is bound to the beat of a procedurally mixed soundtrack that plays in the nightclubs you explore, creating a resounding payoff to encounters as the action rewinds, replaying events in realtime while the music reaches a crescendo.

TOTAL WAR: WARHAMMER II

Developer Creative Assembly **Publisher** Sega
Format PC **Origin** UK **Release** 2017



This follow-up to last year's entertaining strategy mash-up has been cranked out unusually swiftly. Lizardmen, High Elves and Dark Elves have been confirmed as playable factions, while owners of the first game will be able to play on an expanded map combining regions from both campaigns.

MAGES OF MYSTRALIA

Developer/publisher Borealys Games
Format PC, PS4 **Origin** Canada **Release** June



The Harry Potter-meets-_Zelda_ pitch and the involvement of Forgotten Realms author Ed Greenwood helped this fantasy adventure sail past its crowdfunding goal. But an inventive and malleable spellcasting system, with systemic alchemy reminiscent of _Breath Of The Wild_, surely played a part.

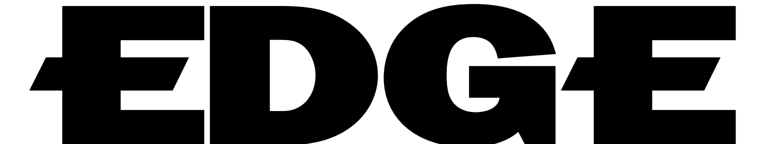
WIPEOUT OMEGA COLLECTION

Developer Sony XDev **Publisher** Sony Interactive Entertainment
Format PS4 **Origin** UK **Release** June 6 (US), June 7 (EU)



The legacy of Studio Liverpool lives on in this remastered collection of more than two dozen reversible courses from _Wipeout HD_, _Fury_ and _2048_. With eight-player online races, a local splitscreen mode and a soundtrack that blends classic tracks and new themes, it should be a luxurious celebration.

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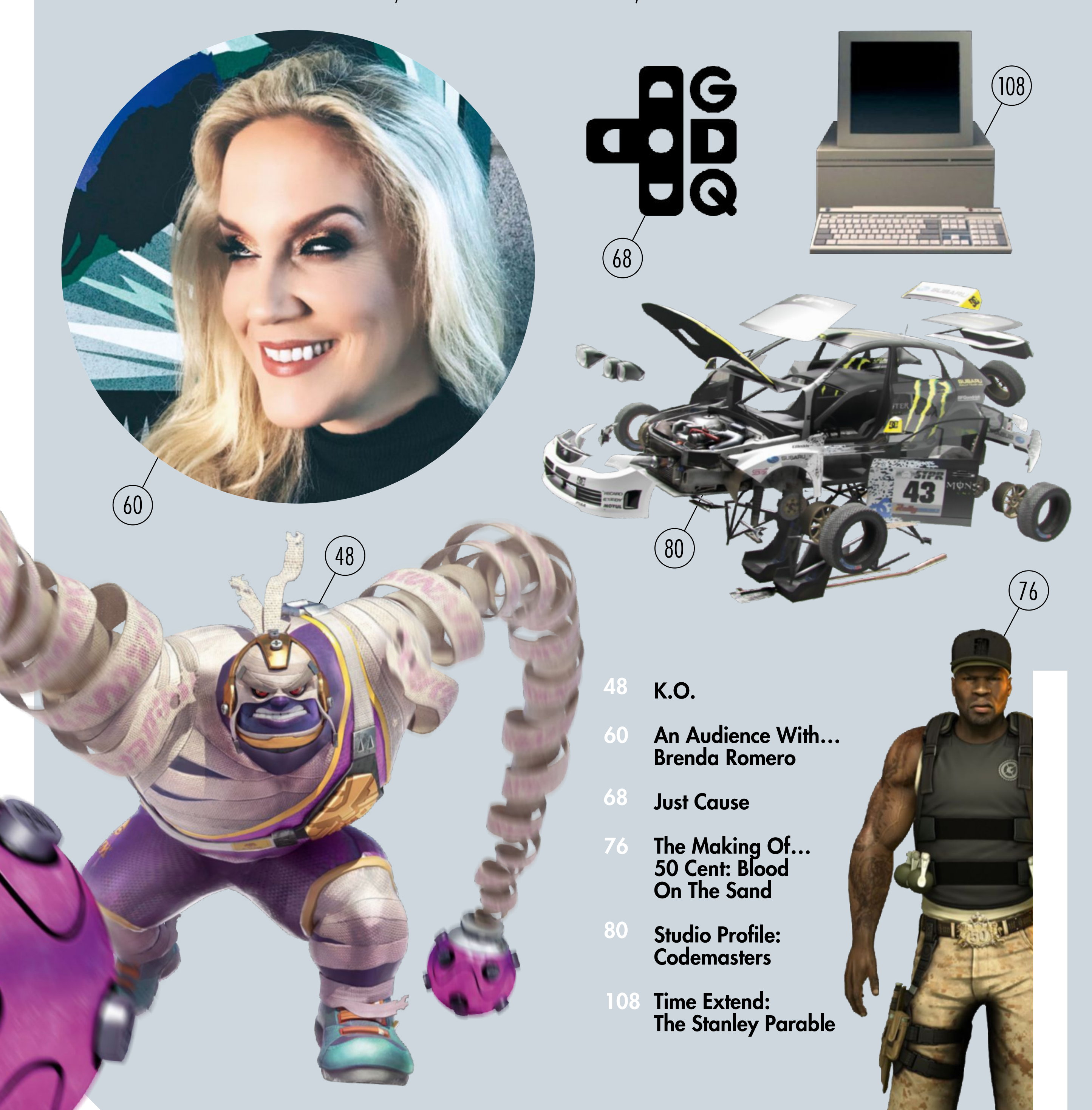
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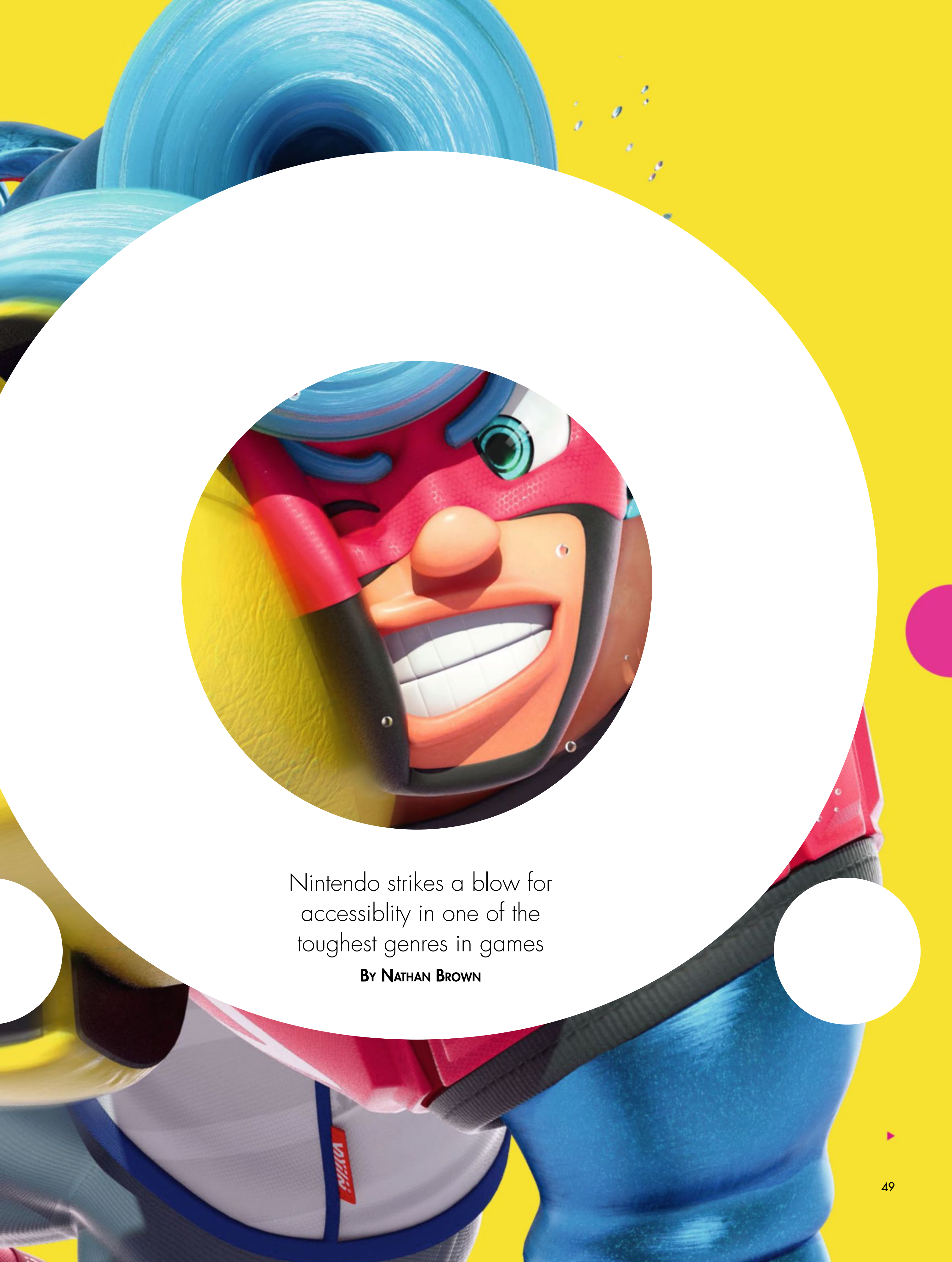
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VIDEOGAME CULTURE, DEVELOPMENT, PEOPLE AND TECHNOLOGY




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Nintendo strikes a blow for accessiblity in one of the toughest genres in games

By Nathan Brown

D

o they even *have* genres at Nintendo? Pick any game from the most enviable back catalogue in all of videogames, then try to neatly categorise it. Chances are, you'll be doing it a disservice. *Pikmin* is no RTS, and *Splatoon* hardly a shooter. *Pilotwings* deserves better than the fusty label of flight sim, and who would dare call *Mario Kart* a driving game? Across most of its time in the videogame business, the only moments a firstparty Nintendo game has slotted neatly into a single genre is because one has had to be invented to accommodate it. Nintendo simply doesn't think that way – which is why, when introducing us to *Arms*, the company's first internally developed versus-fighting game since 1984's *Urban Champion*, producer **Kosuke Yabuki** is talking not only about fists and feet, but guns and ammo, too.

"*Arms*," he says, "is a fighting-sports game that makes use of characters with extendible arms. It's similar to boxing, where you trade blows with an opponent at close range, as ▶



Game *Arms*
Developer/publisher Nintendo
Format Switch
Release June 16





TOP **The green mesh between Spring Man's fists signals a grab attempt. Twist your wrists after the input and his arms will spread out, widening the move's reach.** ABOVE **Splitscreen multiplayer can frustrate, especially when you get hit by a curved punch you couldn't see**

Master Mummy's heavy Megaton arms are hard to counter, but their slow speed leaves him vulnerable should he miss

Arms producer Kosuke Yabuki



Ninjara's mid-air Blink teleport is an absolute delight to use, and incredibly annoying to play against. At first it seems overpowered, but every character has a technique or two that will elicit similar feelings early on

SPRING FASHIONS

Nintendo's character designers have taken *Arms*' core concept – of limbs that unfurl and stretch out, before coiling back up – and really gone to town with it. "We were thinking up ideas relating to things that extend," **Masaaki Ishikawa**, art director, tells us. "Things that would normally be rolled or bunched up, but could be extended with a punch – springs, ribbons, bandages, chains and the like. We then expanded our ideas from there so, for example, we could use chains for a ninja-style character. The characters appear quite prominently, so we've made their designs fairly detailed." He's not kidding: look closely at the image of Spring Man on this issue's cover and you'll note that even his sideburns and pupils appear to be made of coils.





well as shooting, where you aim at an opponent some distance away. I love fighting games and shooters; I feel *Arms* isn't either of those genres, even though it includes elements of both."

It's a bold claim – though not exactly an original one, since no game developer likes the idea of being put in a pigeon-hole. But he's right. *Arms* certainly recalls the shooter in the way it requires a careful aim at a far-off opponent. It's a fighting game, too, with its health bars, its three-round setup, and its use of the classic rock-paper-scissors relationship between blocks, blows and throws. But we've never played a shooter in which the bullet is actually a metal wrecking ball on a coiled spring, whose angle we can change after firing and which flaps daftly in the air if it misses before languidly recoiling its way back to us. And we've never played a fighting game in which landing a simple punch is the hardest thing in the game. We have thousands of hours of experience of both the genres on which *Arms* is supposedly based, yet *Arms* makes us feel not like a veteran, but an absolute rookie. It is nonetheless an instant, and unremitting, delight.

And yet there is, to put it mildly, something of an adjustment period in the opening exchanges of our lengthy sit-down with the game – or, more accurately, our stand-up with it. While seated play is certainly possible – whether playing on the TV using the Joy-Con motion controls or hunched over the Switch in tabletop mode using traditional sticks and buttons – *Arms* is at its best when you're on your feet. You hold the Joy-Cons in what Nintendo calls the Thumbs-Up position, the controllers upright, sticks and buttons facing inwards. You move your character by tilting the controllers in a given direction. Arm motions produce punches, as you'd expect, with twists of the wrist curving the trajectory of your blow; pushing both arms forward at the same time initiates a grab attempt, while bringing the Joy-Cons together in front of you puts up your guard. The shoulder buttons perform jumps and dashes, and when a super meter fills a tap of a trigger will begin a Flurry Rush, where frantic punches with both arms unleash a succession of damaging blows.

ARMS IS, BY DESIGN, SIMPLE AND INTUITIVE, A GENTLE WORKOUT, AND AN ABSOLUTE PLEASURE TO PLAY

Those are not just the basics, but the sum total of *Arms*' controls. There are no tricky special-move inputs, and no lengthy combo strings to learn. It is no coincidence that many of the senior members of the development team have a *Wii Sports* credit on their CV. *Arms* is, by design, simple and intuitive, a gentle workout, and an absolute pleasure to play.

Yet there is depth, and plenty of it. "I wondered if there was any way to make *Arms* a little more accessible as a fighting game," says **Shintaro Jikumaru**, the game's design director, of his early experiments with the *Arms* formula. "Specifically, whether it would be possible to replace the elements that make up a fighting game with something more visually intuitive. For example, instead of having openings in your defence during or after an attack, we have the arm extension and retraction mechanic. And instead of strong and weak attacks, we have light-but-fast and slow-but-heavy weapons."

Your arms, chosen from a selection of three before each round, are independent from each other, allowing you to mix and match your loadout. They're the beating heart of the game, and help smooth over many of the character-balancing issues that are inherent in fighting-game design. Convention dictates that a heavy-set character like *Arms'* Master Mummy should struggle to pin down a fast, flighty opponent like, say, Ribbon Girl. While that can be true, with the right weapon selection, the gap can be closed.

A hefty fist such as the Megaton will not only stop a foe in their tracks if it hits, but can also be used to close off an escape route, letting you deal damage with the lighter, faster weapon in your other hand. A volley of three rockets gives you a better chance of landing a hit on an opponent on the move, while a weighty slam from a hammer will root a static foe to the spot. Arms can be charged up, too, to increase the power of the blow, or inflict troublesome status effects. While you only take three into battle, the choice is huge; a typically fussy Nintendo embargo prevents us from getting too specific, but using an in-game currency you will amass hundreds of possible combinations for each of the game's characters.

Said embargo also forbids us from discussing the size of the roster – one of the more widely expressed concerns after *Arms'* unveiling in January. Suffice it to say that at launch there'll be more than the five shown off at the game's announcement. More seem set to follow, too. "The fighters we've announced are just a fraction of what's to come," Jikumaru says. "We'll be introducing fighters all the time, with all sorts of abilities."

Ah, yes, abilities. The dev team's initial vision was for the game's characters to have active skills, similar to a traditional fighting game's special moves, that could be performed during battle. As development progressed, however, Nintendo changed tack, adding inherent properties to the characters' basic movesets that help differentiate them from each other in more than just their body types. Master Mummy regains health while his guard's up, for instance, while Ribbon Girl can jump four times without touching the ground. Ninjara's airborne dodge is a Blink move that makes incoming blows pass through clean air. The newly revealed Min Min, meanwhile, performs a quick kick automatically when you back- or air-dash that, if properly timed, will knock away an enemy's attack. Any character can counter blows like this with a well-timed punch of their own, or by triggering their Flurry Rush at the right time, but Min Min's ability to do so quickly, while evading, stands her apart.

These little differences define the cast, making each feel different both in the hands and as an opponent. They also show the emphasis *Arms* places on a character's mobility, rather than just their moveset. That's reinforced by the stage design. One features pillars to act as cover, or to bend punches around; another has springboards around its perimeter. Others make use of elevation to show how advantageous the higher ground can be, while still more have destructible elements, so the stage changes over time. All make it harder to get, and keep, a bead on an already flighty opponent.

All that means that simply landing a punch is a feat in itself early on – especially if, like us, you instinctively curve your ▶



Many of the team were hooked on ***Street Fighter II*** as kids. It's referenced in Spring Man's Shoryuken-style grab animation



real-world punches, and have to coach yourself into shooting straight. It says much that our first victory by timeout – where, in the genre tradition, the winner is the one with the most remaining health when the timer hits zero – comes not between two slow, cagey opponents, but two of the fastest characters in the game. While we're still finding our feet (OK, fists) after six hours of play, the CPU AI shows us how it should be done on its higher difficulties: our opponent, Ninjara, wins by timeout after we've failed to land a single hit. It's a general fighting game truism that knowing how to not get hit is as important as being able to land the most damaging combo, but never has the balance felt so firmly tipped towards the former. *Arms* is a game played with few inputs, but there is a tremendous amount to think about during play. It has been, Jikumaru admits, a complex process to drill *Arms* down to this magical balance of simplicity and complexity.

"First of all we asked ourselves how we wanted players to use each of the characters," he says. "For example, is this a character who doesn't jump much, and is mainly for ground combat? Or is this a character who is going to jump a lot? Once we had this decided, we started testing out abilities. Our approach was to pick abilities that were a lot of fun to use – that you just couldn't help but use, and that felt very intuitive."

What, then, of character balance, which is one of the defining elements of any successful fighting game? As should be clear by now, *Arms* doesn't abide by genre rules; in order to ensure all its moving parts played nicely together, the development team had to rethink its traditional approach to game balance. During the making of *Breath Of The Wild*, for ▶

instance, the development staff would occasionally down tools for a week or more to play the game. *Arms* may not match Switch's current star attraction for size and scope, but the devil's in the detail in the fighting-game genre, a few frames of animation in either direction capable of putting a character at the top of the tier list, or consigning them to the trashcan.

"In addition to the vast number of possibilities you can get from the different combinations of left arm, fighter and right arm, if you include the advantages and disadvantages incurred in stages as well, then it's not practical to balance everything with just a handful of designers," Jikumaru says. "To cope with this, we designed some systems to tabulate the battle results of all the developers, as well as a system for the AI to battle itself all night." More traditional methods – of playtesting, iterating and playtesting again – were employed too, of course, but those unseen AI all-nighters were a vital tool in the creation of a game that, currently at least, feels remarkably well balanced coming from a company with little genre experience.

Those automated matches were also essential because playing *Arms* stood up, Joy-Cons in hand, with motion controls is hardly a relaxing experience. We depart our six-hour session exhausted, and apologetic for leaving a Nintendo demo area smelling like a locker room. The more sedentarily inclined – or those unable to play standing up because they've taken their Switch on public transport, say – can make use of less physically intensive control options afforded by Nintendo's multifaceted new hardware. Slot the Joy-Cons into a grip peripheral, hand over one of the controllers to a friend, or pick up a Pro Controller, and *Arms* starts to feel a little more familiar. Punches can be thrown using the triggers, or two of the face buttons – jump and dash are mapped to the other two. You click the left stick to guard. Everything you need is here, and it works – but something's missing. Since the left stick controls the angle of your punches, you can't move in one direction and punch in the other. You can't strike at a different angle with your other hand until the first punch is fully extended, either.

Robbed of the physicality of its motion-control inputs, *Arms* isn't quite the same. No doubt these alternative control options have been added to ensure the game is playable in every situation in which you can use a Switch. Yet it also feels like a thumb of the nose, however unintentional, to players who spent the Wii generation complaining they'd have preferred to have played *Motion-Controlled Game X* sat on their backsides with sticks and buttons. On-foot motion controls aren't the only way to play *Arms*, but for our money, they're far and away the best. Producer Yabuki, as you'd expect, agrees.

"The true feel of *Arms* comes when you're holding both Joy-Con controllers in the Thumbs-Up grip," he says. "You can throw punches from each hand with real precision as you dash or jump around, allowing for a lot more depth for your fighting style. It's possible to throw a straight punch as a feint for your first blow, then curve your second punch to where your opponent runs to. But *Arms* doesn't require you to use motion controls. I hope people will pick the playstyle that suits them."

We rather hope motion controls become the standard – if only for the sight of seeing pro fighting-game players flailing around during match-winning Flurry Rushes on the biggest stages of the tournament circuit. Yet for that to happen, the passionate, but highly demanding, fighting-game audience will have to accept it as a pastime worthy of their support. At the other end of the scale, *Arms* is a Nintendo game, so must appeal to a wide audience; and as an early release for a young console, it needs to lure in as many early Switch adopters as possible. Appealing to such different groups might seem like an impossible task. Jukimaru, however, doesn't see it that way.

"I don't actually consider fighting games to be a niche genre," he says. "There are a lot of big games, and a lot of titles that are prominent on the esports scene. It's a fiercely competitive genre. We designed the appearance and systems of *Arms* so that people can feel like it's the kind of game they'd like to play, too, by making it so you could see the trajectory of your arms, and by reducing the amount of things you have to memorise. And because we were using motion controls, we worked hard to make sure that while you could play simply by waving your hands, you couldn't win against a good player by just doing that. Making games accessible while still maintaining plenty of depth is a never-ending problem in videogame development, and we have taken on that challenge with *Arms* as well."

Yet if there is a concern, it's that *Arms* falls awkwardly between two stools, at least as a concept: a game in a genre enjoyed by serious, skilled players, but whose presentation and control system seem designed to appeal to a more casual audience. Both groups can rest easy. Fighting-game players can look forward to a game that is unlike any other they have ever played, that is based on the same set of fundamental building blocks that let the genre work its magic, and whose customisable loadouts offer up tremendous scope for theorycrafting and experimentation. The less experienced will find a game that strips away the elements that typically turn people off the genre, with intuitive, instinctive controls. Those in between can simply look forward to what appears to be another essential purchase for Switch.

Nintendo execs have spoken frequently in recent years about the need to create new IP, understanding that it cannot ride on *Mario* and *Link*'s backs for all eternity, and perhaps acknowledging that the company's reputation for fearless, restless creativity was under threat. Yet that is one monstrous legacy to try and work under. Do Nintendo staff feel as if they have been tasked with making a new game, or the first entry in a series that is going to run for 30 years and counting?

"It would be like a dream for this to become a franchise spanning decades," Yabuki says. "But right now, only a small number of people in the world know about *Arms*: those who closely follow new games and technology. First, I'd like those people to play *Arms*, and have fun with it. This game offers a brand-new playstyle, brand-new characters and brand-new strategic gameplay." We stand corrected: there's a pigeon-hole into which plenty of Nintendo games can fit. ■

"YOU CAN THROW PUNCHES FROM EACH HAND WITH REAL PRECISION AS YOU DASH OR JUMP AROUND"

Min Min's Dragon laser is great for controlling space, especially when it's fully charged

DEEP IMPACT

While Nintendo has clearly focused on making *Arms* feel accessible even to novice fighting-game players, genre stalwarts will find plenty of depth beneath the surface. Well-timed jabs can knock away incoming attacks, and grab attempts can be similarly countered. You can focus attacks not on the opponent's body, but their arms; damage one or both enough, and they'll be disabled for a spell. The most versatile tool is the Flurry Rush super, which has a burst-like property upon activation to bat away nearby limbs; can be delayed, so you can activate it and wait for the dodge attempt before you start to punch; and which can be cancelled into from other attacks regardless of whether they hit. We discover this by accident, hitting the trigger button to activate Flurry Rush in a panic, after realising a grab attempt was going to miss its target.



One item appears per round. Canisters offer health or super-meter regen within an area of effect, while timebombs are batted back and forth until they explode. These will be divisive, but can be turned off


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AN AUDIENCE WITH...

BRENDA ROMERO

Tracing a line through one of the most eclectic careers in videogames

By Alex Wiltshire

Brenda Romero's games have covered almost every genre and audience, from resolutely commercial to arthouse; fantasy to shlocky; thoughtful to cute. She's lead and built studios, developed and run academic courses, and explored in a personal series of boardgames ways in which game design can express difficult human themes. There's pretty much no area of game development she hasn't had a hand in at some point or other. Here, on the eve of receiving the BAFTA Special Award for her contributions to the industry, she discusses her recent move to Galway, her experiences with Silicon Valley culture, why she designed a game about slavery for her daughter, and her fascination with chefs.

How are you enjoying living in Ireland?

Oh, jeez, well, we love it! We came to Ireland in 2014. There was a time when if you wanted to make games you needed to be in one of the centres where they're made, but increasingly that's just not the case. And there's a great indie-game scene happening here in Ireland, and EA's got 400 people here as well. So we just made a decision; we could be anywhere we want to be, so why not here?

What's your day-to-day life in Galway like?

I teach at the University of Limerick in the game development programme where I've just started up a Masters in game design, so I might be teaching, but most days I'm working on a new game. Every day is different and it depends on where you are in the project, but right now I'm in pre-production. Most of the day is working with the team, setting up the architecture and answering the design questions that need to be answered. It's absolutely the most fun part of making a game.

What can you tell us about the game?

[Laughs] I can tell you it's a game! All I can really say is that it's a game I've been looking forward to make. I don't think anyone will be surprised about it. It's about a topic I've wanted to make a game about since I was, geez, I don't know, probably in my 20s, so a long time.





CV

Brenda Romero, née Brathwaite, began her career in 1981 when a love for *D&D* drew her to work at Sir-Tech, which was based in her home town of Ogdensburg, New York. She remained there, working on the *Wizardry* series and *Jagged Alliance*, for 18 years before she left to follow an eclectic path, developing titles from *Dungeons & Dragons: Heroes* to *Playboy: The Mansion* as well as a series of personal boardgames. In 2008 she became chair of the game development department at Savannah College of Art and Design, leaving to join social game developer Slide and later Lolapps as creative director. With John Romero, who she later married, she founded Loot Drop in 2010, developing *Ravenwood Fair* and *Tom Clancy's Ghost Recon: Commander*. Following Loot Drop's demise, she became game designer in residence at the University of California. Her most recent game is *Gunman Taco Truck*.

When did you first get the idea that you could use videogames as a medium for communicating complex themes?
I started working on these [board] games in 2005 and 2006, and it was as a result of having gone through some pretty difficult times. My brother's a musician, and musicians might write a song about having gone through an experience, or a writer might write about it, and I just started thinking, 'Could I make games about these things?' If we think about great photographs, in a single photograph it's possible to capture an incredible depth of experience, and I wondered if games could do that. I believed they could, but could they do it in a way that wasn't borrowing from another medium, so the game's at its absolute barest, literally just the mechanics? Could you do that? The very first game I was thinking about back then I finally just made. It's called Black Box, and it's single-play, singleplayer. I've already played it and the end state is sealed in a box. That's a game about what happened to me in 2006.

What was the first game you completed that explored this idea?
My daughter, Maezza, was seven at the time. She came home from school and I asked her what she'd done that day, and she said they talked about the Middle Passage. Her dad is half black and so I asked her what she thought about it, and she gave this very matter-of-fact answer about the boats coming from England, going to Africa and taking slaves to the States where they were sold into slavery, and then Abraham Lincoln was elected president and passed the Emancipation Proclamation. She said it with no emotion, which surprised me because it's actually directly part of her history.

She asked if she could play a game, because I like making analogue prototypes of any game I'm working on, and just there I came up with one. I handed her all these little pieces and told her to paint them as families, and then I took a bunch of them and put them on a boat. I've only got some from each family, and so she was trying to put the others in there: "You forgot the pink daddy!" And I kept putting them back and said no, and she said, "But they want to go!" And I said, "No, this is the Middle Passage, nobody wants to go."

As we were crossing the ocean I gave her a six-sided die and 30 units of food and she had to make it across, and at some point she realised that she might not make it and asked what we were going to do. I said, "Well, we can put some people in the water, or we can try to make it." After all of it, she asks, "Did this really happen?" It was just heartbreaking to me, and we ended up having a really

> "AFTER ALL OF IT, SHE ASKS, 'DID THIS REALLY HAPPEN?' IT WAS JUST HEARTBREAKING, AND WE ENDED UP HAVING A LONG DISCUSSION"

long discussion about whether any of the families found each other. It was really moving, for her, for me, and for her father. Game design is all I've ever done, and maybe if I'd have been an author I'd have written about it. But I'm a game designer, so I think in terms of systems.

I then made a game about my family's past, Síochán Leat, which everybody calls The Irish Game. And then I decided to make four more games all about difficult subject matter. The one I made with Maezza is called The New World, and probably the best-known is Train. Three others are still in the works.

How have these projects changed your understanding of what games can achieve?
I think games have grown tremendously. Having been in the industry for a hell of a long time, I've gone from people saying when kids get in trouble, "Did they play D&D?" It used to be about heavy metal, then it was D&D and then it was *Doom* and *Grand Theft Auto*, and now in the States people aren't asking those questions any more. They've also got to an interesting point where when you say you made a game about something, people don't say, "You can't make a game about that!" When I started, I absolutely had people say that.

In the sense that people believed that because videogames are meant to be fun they can't tackle serious subjects?
Yeah, especially with Train. I don't think I've ever made a game better than Train. I tried to make it the perfect game, as perfect as I could make it. When I first started making them, I remember someone saying, "That's not fun." But they fundamentally, stripped of their narrative, have to be. It's not an option to cheat and make a game about a dark subject matter that isn't engaging.

But what people expect from a game has changed, and that's just because the design community is continuously broadening the horizons of the material that we cover.

I wasn't trying to get known and have them put on display. In fact, [famed Infocom designer] Steve Meretzky found out about them at a gathering and he said, "Come on, you've got to talk about these games." He loved the idea. So pushed by him I gave a talk at a conference, and I didn't know there was a reporter there and he wrote about it. Then everybody knew about them and I feared I'd get responses like, "Brenda, you need to be punched." And instead the response was overwhelmingly positive.

Back then what people perceived games could do was a lot different, but my favourite game of the past few years would be *1979 Revolution: Black Friday*. Absolute masterwork of a game. There's no brand-new mechanics in it, but it's the story it's telling and how it *uses* its mechanics. *Inside*: what a frigging game, you know? It left me thinking forever. Or *Her Story*, which I loved, and *The Beginner's Guide*. They're different types of games about topics we maybe wouldn't have covered ten years ago. I really feel that's one of the most exciting things about games, how they've grown well beyond the constraints of what people used to think.

One of the first great examples of this in my opinion was Vander Caballero's *Papo & Yo*, which is about his father and his struggles with alcoholism, or Jason Rohrer's *Passage*. Some of the really early games that were pushing the boundaries. That's not to say it wasn't done before, but they left a deep impact.

Are there any limits to how videogames can tackle larger themes?
Huh, you know, I don't really feel like there are any limits. The only one I can think of is time, and that's just very personal. When you turn 50 you wonder, how much more time do I have to make games? And I know I have more ideas than I have time. So now it's a priority issue, though retirement honestly means John and I making the games we want to make. I can't actually imagine us putting down the computers [laughs].

But I can't see there being any limits. Videogames are much easier to make than they used to be. There are so many more tools, so many more ways to distribute them. There are game festivals. The voices of game creators from all over the world are getting out there with different stories. Sometimes when I'm teaching I'll raise the discussion with students about why it's so important to get as many different voices in games as we can. I ask them to imagine that we've been born and raised just in this room, so it's all we've ever seen. We know each other and the games we'd make are inspired by this room and each other, and we can't imagine too much outside of that. So by giving different people voices in games, I just don't see there being a limit. There are so many stories that haven't been told.

What was it like to jump into building a company, Loot Drop, to make social games?
It was interesting! Especially being in Silicon Valley at the time and getting in pretty early. Social games rose in Silicon Valley underneath the shadow of gigantic game companies who didn't really pay it any attention until it was too late, right? It was fascinating because it was a time when I, for the first time in my career, was the core market. So that was amazing, and my friends and family who'd never given a shit about anything I'd ever made before suddenly were asking me questions like, "Do you make *FarmVille*?" They wanted to play games. The amazing thing is that social games brought 500 million players into the market who'd never played videogames before, and many of those people have stayed and become game literate.

From within the industry there was a lot of derision, but I didn't get hit nearly as much as John. I asked him if he'd be interested in joining Loot Drop, and if you look at John's list of games he's always interested in the next thing, so he was fascinated and we started working together on a game that became *Ravenwood Fair*. For me ▶

2005's ***Playboy: The Mansion*** **is a** ***Sims*****-like game. Romero's work on it prompted her to write a book called Sex In Video Games the following year**



Launched on Facebook in 2010 and closed in 2013, *Ravenwood Fair* was a social game about building a funfair in a spooky wood

it's not a problem for people at all, even though I come from really hardcore, number-crunchy, 70-hour RPGs. But John took so much shit! Oh my god! People saying, "Oh, Romero, how the mighty fall." The irony is that people are saying this to him while his game is outselling *World Of Warcraft*. We had over 25 million players. "Piece of shit, what a failure." Making over a million dollars on some days. "What a wuss." Because it was a cute fairytale game, just how dare he do this? But he wasn't alone in taking shit from people; a lot of developers in social games at the time were the giants in the game world.

Steve Meretzky, Paul Neurath...

Yes! Bob Bates, Greg Costikyan. A lot of heavyweight designers went into that space.

As a designer, how did you find working with monetisation in social games?

It was a pretty steep learning curve. Obviously, the game itself has to be fun, but you're giving it away for free and you need to figure out a way to make your money back, which forces certain design decisions. Instead of making sure the player has just enough of something, you have to make sure they have just *not* enough, and you have to know where the friction points are, where you might ramp things. All in all, having come through that, as a designer I prefer the other side. I prefer making a fun game and putting it out. When we released *Gunman Taco Truck* it was originally 99 cents and then we changed it so it was ad-supported, but we didn't want to break the core game. I know we could sell ingredients but it wouldn't be *Gunman Taco Truck*, it'd be this monetisation engine and it would've lost something. For me as a designer, man, it was a learning curve like a rocket.

It was one of the most dynamic times in games because things would change in a day. Coming out of companies where your sprints might take six weeks, it was planning things in the morning that we'd ship that day. When people changed to the energy model and then away from it, it'd happen in the space of a couple of days. No matter what you learned you had to quickly unlearn it because another company would come up with another model. When *Clash Of Clans* came out, which was pay-to-rush, we had to change our game. Some people who weren't doing energy tried to retroactively stuff energy into their games. Day-one retention, making sure you have appointment mechanics to get players back during the day, tomorrow, a week from now. How are they engaging other people?

It was in itself a game, especially in the very early days. Facebook, which was where it was all happening, had its policies, and if one of the PMs spotted a potential loophole in those policies they'd exploit it. Naturally Facebook would clamp down on it within a very short time, but during it you might be able to expose the game to a tonne more people.

But in the end, it forces certain design decisions and I would rather just make a really fun game and sell it for a premium price. By which I mean 99 cents [laughs]. And there are some ethical things in social games, like charging whales more because you know they'll likely spend more. They don't sit well with me, though it's a very small fraction of games that do that. For me, these aren't the kind of games I play any more, and I want to make the kinds of games that I would really like to play.

What was it like to be a female game developer in the early days?

When I first got into games it felt really normal. At Sir-Tech Software there were five women and five men in the company. I know that's not normal. The person I worked most closely with was a woman, Linda Sirotek, now Linda Currie, and there were other women in positions of power, so it didn't feel at all strange. But by the time we got to 2001 and I was working on *Wizardry 8*, it was just me and Linda left and a whole team of guys. And then I



started working on other teams and it was me and all guys on much larger teams. But because I grew up in it, it didn't seem weird to me at all. It wasn't until I went to Slide in 2009, which had a huge number of women, and that felt very weird. Not wrong, and it wasn't that I didn't like it, but it felt odd to be around so many women. As for the industry itself, I remember when I first started I knew five female developers, and that was it. Now, if I go to a conference there are tonnes of women; it's gone from me knowing everybody to knowing nearly none of them.

But it's largely been a positive experience. I've certainly had loads of press just because I'm a woman, so that's interesting. But at the same time there's a bit of a female tax, as I put it. Nobody calls up John and says hey, can we talk about what it's like to be a man in games. I wouldn't say it ever played against me; no one ever said I couldn't work on a title because I'm a woman. Certainly during the heyday of social games it worked tremendously to my benefit; I was getting calls left, right and centre, because they thought they needed female designers. The sky was the limit, I could set my price. It was amazing. There have been uncomfortable times when there's an event in a strip club, and you're like, "For fuck's sake." I think naked female bodies are beautiful but it's a weird place for me to do business. However, that's really pretty rare. Only one time have I ever had an ugly encounter with somebody inside the game industry who was male. The pile of ugly experiences of me just being a woman in the general outside world is far larger than the pile in the game industry.

Does it frustrate you to have had such a long career as a game maker but get asked about being a woman before you're asked about your work?

It's something I find something positive in. I could answer yes; sometimes I'll find conferences have a tonne of speakers and all their diversity speakers are slammed on the diversity panel, right? So none of them are talking about their work. In those cases, it's frustrating, not for me, but in general. Invite people to talk about their work!

But I also know it is important for people to have role models. It's weird to think of myself as a role model – as a mother, yes, I need to be, but it feels like an arrogant thing to say about myself. But I had these two amazing experiences and they happened within a couple of weeks of each other. First I was at QuakeCon in 2014, and I don't know how John and I thought we were going to do anything at QuakeCon, because he didn't say he was coming and we only got as far as the lobby – he just stood there meeting fans all day. Anyway, there was just one guy standing to the side and I could tell he was nervous, and so I asked him if he wanted to talk to John. And he was like, "No, I don't want to." I said it looked like he was a fan of his games, and he said, "Well, yes, but that's not why I don't want to talk to him." And the reason he was so overwhelmed to see him was that when he was growing up he was a young Mexican kid like John was, and seeing how John had become a tremendous success in games, he knew he could be a tremendous success, too. That meant a lot to him.

"THERE HAVE BEEN UNCOMFORTABLE TIMES WHEN THERE'S AN EVENT IN A STRIP CLUB, AND YOU'RE LIKE, 'FOR FUCK'S SAKE'"

Then, a couple of weeks later, we were in London at Gordon Ramsay's restaurant. One of my big areas of fascination is Michelin three-star chefs, who I find to be a lot like game designers. Clare Smyth was the head chef at the time, and I want to say it doesn't matter to me that she's a woman, that it's meaningless, but it does. I was saying something about her and the maître d' overheard me and asked if I'd like to meet her, and I was like, "Oh my, what! Yes!" She's a role model because she's literally at the top of her game and I'm not yet at the absolute top of mine. I'm somewhere on the ladder and so's she, and I can look up and see someone like me. ■



Romero lead the design of 2001's *Wizardry 8*, introducing various features new to the series, including smooth movement and non-random battles


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JUST CAUSE

How the videogame industry and community are changing – and saving – lives

By Ben Maxwell

Hug the goat," the crowd chants, the volume rising. It is January 15, in the ballroom of the Hilton Washington Dulles Airport hotel, and a speedrunner named TGH is trying to beat his own *Undertale* True Pacifist world record. There are only seconds to go, and it's now obvious to everyone in the room – and the thousands watching this year's instalment of week-long speedrun festival Awesome Games Done Quick via Twitch – that he isn't going to top his previous performance. But it doesn't matter. As if somehow planned, TGH embraces the hircine Asriel exactly as the clock ticks onto his existing record time and at the same moment that event donations tick over the record-breaking $2.2 million mark. The chanting falls away, replaced by deafening applause and cheering. TGH looks back at the crowd, and raises a fist in triumph.

In all, the event – which saw nearly 200 speedruns completed over its duration – brought in a total of $2,222,790.52 (roughly £1.8 million) for the Prevent Cancer Foundation from 43,472 patrons. During THG's run, *Undertale* creator Toby Fox donated $10,000. It may have broken records, but AGDQ's January event was just one of the many memorable acts of philanthropy that take place throughout the year, every year, within the game industry, raising millions for charity on the part of player communities.

Other entertainment industries give to charity as well, of course, but the videogame sector stands out for having a uniquely engaged audience and creative community. Charities such as Special Effect and Child's Play are wholly immersed in videogames: they thrive on the donations of players, and their work empowers children and young people to play in ways that they might not otherwise have been able to. And endeavours such as Humble Bundle – which sees customers setting their own price and allocating a portion of it to selected charities – have no equivalents in other industries.

"It's an industry that has giving at its core," says **Abbie Cheesman**, corporate partnerships manager at Whale And Dolphin Conservation (WDC), which has benefited significantly from Humble Bundle donations and other videogame partnerships. "It doesn't matter who we speak to – studios, indie devs, journalists or players – everyone wants to help. You only have to look at Humble really: there aren't many industries that have something like Humble Bundle. It's such an example of best practice. Our lives as fundraisers would be incredibly easy if lots of different industries took the same approach to giving and doing good that the game industry does. For me, it's the leading industry in terms of actively, and proactively, looking to give something back. It's testament to the kind of people that are involved – everyone's really engaged and passionate, from the CEOs that we deal with, right down to the people who are designing, creating or playing."

WDC only started working with the game industry three years ago, but that portion of its fundraising has since grown to the point that it now pays for one of the charity's five global programmes for a full year. "We've just been incredibly lucky across the board," Cheesman says. "It all started with an approach from **James Schall** – who's director of digital distribution at Sega Europe, and who's really passionate about conservation and our cause – back in 2014 about working together on a Humble Bundle. It was something that had never been on our radar before – not because we didn't want to work with the game industry, but purely because it wasn't an industry we thought would be interested in working with us."

"OUR LIVES AS FUNDRAISERS WOULD BE INCREDIBLY EASY IF LOTS OF DIFFERENT INDUSTRIES TOOK THE SAME APPROACH"

Since then WDC has, among other things, been involved with several Humble Bundles, partnered with Relic on a Gamers For Orcas initiative, introduced a Dragon Orca to Gameloft's *Dragon Mania Legends*, worked with 505 Games and *Abzû* creator Giant Squid, and is now going directly to players by organising a gaming marathon, set to take place in June. The game industry's disproportionate generosity has taken WDC, and many other charities, by surprise. So why is it that players and developers are so willing to give up their time and money?

"I think videogames get a bit of a tough time from outside the industry over various topics and criticisms," ▶

DEFENDERS OF THE FUTURE

As a videogame envoy for Whale And Dolphin Conservation's cause, *Abzû* couldn't be a better fit. "If we'd sat down as a charity and tried to conceive of the most perfect game for our cause, it would be *Abzû*," Abbie Cheesman tells us. "The whole experience is beautiful, and the team are all divers and free divers." Publisher 505 Games was keen to see Giant Squid and WDC working together, but what drove that? "Primarily the desire to be more to our audience than just a game or company," Erik Heiberg explains. "Matt Nava, creative director on *Abzû*, is very passionate about protecting ocean and sea life and that comes through in the theme of the game. We all recognise that there's an opportunity to unite *Abzû*'s community around something bigger than the game and the partnership with WDC represents that perfectly."





WDC's Abbie Cheesman (top) and Sega's James Schall


JUST CAUSE

Schall says. "But actually we're a really passionate and active force – be that developers, publishers or fans. Perhaps that negative perception is something we all subconsciously push against. If you do charity content right, it's a win for everyone – it's not the same as putting a few coins in a bucket. With some projects, the donator, the charity and the game can all receive something tangible and valuable."

It's a viewpoint shared by many of the industry's videogame-focused charities. Take Child's Play, which aims to improve the lives of children in hospitals and domestic-violence shelters by providing consoles and games, and was founded in 2003 by Penny Arcade's Mike Krahulik and Jerry Holkins. The charity gifts games and hardware, donated by players, to facilities annually, but in the past two years has also begun educating staff on games' therapeutic uses.

"When Child's Play started there was just a ton of bad press out there about videogames, " **Travis Eriksen**, who oversees partner relations, tells us. "You know: videogames make people violent, videogames are resulting in kids being antisocial, and all that stuff. But Mike and Jerry knew who their fans were, and that gamers were generally nice people. So they put those two things together and said, 'We hate seeing that this is how the media portrays us. Let's see if we can collect toys and help Seattle Children's Hospital.' They ended up filling the garage they had, and had to rent a storage unit just to cope. They were just overwhelmed by all the donations from fans of Penny Arcade who said, 'Yeah, cool, I'm going to buy one toy and send it off to the children's hospital.' When all their readers did that it was this huge thing, and that became this huge charity that we've been running for a long time. We've raised over $40 million since we started, and it's all from gamers and the game industry that are working to partner with us."

The donations that Child's Play receives span the gamut from huge lump sums to smaller, more personal contributions. This year's internet-based fundraiser event Desert Bus For Hope – in which members of sketch comedy group LoadingReadyRun streamed themselves playing Penn and Teller's infamously terrible eight-hour driving minigame repeatedly for a week – raised $700,000. A cheque for $321, meanwhile, was sent in by a six-year-old girl after she decided to forego birthday presents in favour of getting her friends to donate to the charity.

"We have a really active group," Eriksen continues. "We have a lot of people who grew up with Nintendo or whatever, and now we're at the point where *we* have kids. I'm thankful that both of my sons are super-healthy and haven't had anything other than minor doctor's trips, but it's really easy to empathise with families in that situation and to know how important and powerful games were for us growing up, and how much more prominent they are in the culture today. To be able to share that is a no-brainer. Nobody looks at that and thinks, 'I don't really know if that's important or helpful.' It's just, 'Yeah, I totally get this.'"

"AS AN INDUSTRY, WE'RE ABLE TO DO SO MUCH GOOD THROUGH VIDEOGAMES. LOOK AT ALL THE PEOPLE WE CAN SUPPORT"

GamesAid is another charity whose endeavours have been driven by a desire to show what the videogame industry is capable of. The umbrella charity supports several smaller UK charities each year – voted for by its game-industry members – and has so far raised and distributed over £2.5 million since it was set up in 2008. The ripple effects of its work reach well beyond the videogame community.

"We can say, 'Actually, as an industry, we're able to do *so* much good through videogames – when we work together, look at all these people we can support,'" GamesAid trustee **Tracey McGarrigan** says, echoing Eriksen's sentiment. "Being very active and visible while doing that is really powerful, and the effect we can have is what attracts people to the industry, I think. Hopefully some of these young people we're supporting will join the game industry; we're making them aware that we're here, and we're here to help them. Whatever difficult time you're going through, the game industry is one of the most welcoming, creative, and fascinating industries that you can work in." ▶

ALTERNATIVE STREAMS

While donations are an important component of charities' income each year, organisations are increasingly seeking to find other ways to engage directly with players and developers and support their fundraising efforts. "Every year we're raising more money to give to more charities," Tracey McGarrigan says. "Part of the challenge, the thing that drives us, is to keep getting more and more people from the industry to support the work that GamesAid is doing. One initiative that we've got coming up is called Digital For Good, which is us working in partnership with platforms like Steam and Humble Bundle to support all of those devs that go, 'You know what? I'd love to sell something and the profits go to GamesAid.' We're going to act as a publisher so that kind of content can come to market. Having those creative commercial ideas is increasingly important, and hopefully we can continue to make more money to give to more charities."





Child's Play's Travis Eriksen (top) and GamesAid's Tracey McGarrigan



GAMESAID SEEKS TO HARNESS THE TALENTS AND ENERGY OF OUR INDUSTRY TO GET OUT AND RAISE MONEY FOR GREAT CAUSES

GAMESAID.ORG

The industry's inherent creativity is a key point. This is a medium whose creators and players embrace new technologies and ideas with a fierce enthusiasm that is rarely seen in other sectors. Take Humble Bundles for example: today, players are so familiar with them that it's easy to forget how innovative the concept was when it burst onto the scene in 2010.

"The Humble Bundle is kind of a novel idea, and I think the game industry is a bit more experimental than other industries," Humble's vice president of product **Nate Muller** tells us. "We're more willing to try weird stuff. It's a really weird business model, and it's hard to explain to people – certainly to developers and publishers. But the game industry is more willing to listen to crazy ideas and give them a shot. It's really funny actually, because some of the charities get scared off by our model because they think we're some kind of scam. It almost sounds too good to be true, right? 'All we need from you is a logo, and then we'll send you tens of thousands of dollars, maybe more.' But now – and I'm not sure if we've publicly thrown this number out yet – we have just crossed $95 million in donations to charity [since Humble was founded]."

The first bundle, which supported the Electronic Frontier Foundation and Child's Play, was purchased 138,813 times and raised over $1.27 million. Players could, if they wanted, choose to donate all of their chosen purchase price to the charities, giving none to developers or Humble. "The charitable element really came from a belief in consumer choice," Muller says. "Players could buy their games from anywhere, but millions of customers continue to buy from Humble Bundle. We think a portion of that is because they like to give to charity. So it really is the community that's choosing the charitable component."

The success of Humble Bundle relies on a delicately balanced ecosystem in which publishers, developers and charities must embrace an unusual business model, and requires that players engage with an esoteric method of getting hold of downloadable games. But technology and innovation also play a crucial role in enabling players to raise money for charity on their own terms. The nature of online play and livestreaming makes gaming a highly social activity whose connective power extends well beyond the live-event circuit to the consumption of the media itself – a fact underscored by the likes of Awesome Games Done Quick and the potential for individual streamers to contribute.

"All of our support comes from the community," Eriksen says. "The majority of it is put together by people doing streams and things like that. Now, it's really easy to share your hobby, and at the same time pick a charity that you can support. I think that's part of why gamers are so engaged. They tend to be on the cutting edge of what technology is doing. Twitch was made for videogame streaming, so we already have that key piece of engagement. If you're streaming already, it's really easy to add this little widget to the side so that everybody watching can also give to Child's Play."

Like Child's Play, SpecialEffect is another charity that is deeply embedded within the industry it supports. The group helps gamers with physical disabilities to play games by modifying or creating custom control setups, and provides support so that recipients can get the most out of them. It's a gesture that helps many people engage with a community that they would otherwise be unable to. **Mark Saville**, the charity's communications support officer, points to the industry's communal spirit as a key factor in the proliferation of charitable behaviour.

"The videogame industry and community are built around an intensely social infrastructure, which naturally creates greater awareness of good causes, especially ones like SpecialEffect, which resonate so closely," he says. "Games offer such great opportunities for people with disabilities to play on a level playing field with their friends and families. But the impact goes way beyond the fun factor: it's bringing families and friends together, it's providing escapism, it's providing an increase in self-esteem. We're seeing new benefits every day. Last week a parent said to me, 'I feel so much better now that my daughter can join in with everyone else.' And we have real synergy with the gaming community. ▶





Special Effect's Mark Saville (top) and Humble Bundle's Nate Muller

"IT'S BRINGING FAMILIES AND FRIENDS TOGETHER, IT'S PROVIDING ESCAPISM, IT'S PROVIDING AN INCREASE IN SELF-ESTEEM"

CHILD'S PLAY SEEKS TO IMPROVE THE LIVES OF CHILDREN IN HOSPITALS AND DOMESTIC-VIOLENCE SHELTERS THROUGH THE GENEROSITY OF THE VIDEOGAME INDUSTRY AND THE POWER OF PLAY

CHILDSPLAYCHARITY.ORG

They get what we're trying to do. So many times we've heard people say, 'I can't imagine life without games – how can I help?' It's humbling and inspiring."

Recognising this philanthropic streak in players is a part of what has allowed companies like Humble Bundle (and, indeed, digital platforms such as Steam, which also allows players and developers to make charitable donations) to thrive at the cutting edge of consumerism. It reflects a wider shift in the priorities and expectations of customers, certainly, but the industry's proactive response to that shift has been remarkable.

"I think this is more of an issue of corporate governance than something that is necessarily industry specific," **Erik Heiberg**, brand manager at *Abzû* publisher 505 Games, says. "Businesses exist to make money and it's difficult for business leaders to shift revenue to something that doesn't immediately demonstrate a positive impact on growth. It's generational as well. There are companies outside the gaming industry that do quite well and incorporate 'cause' into their corporate culture, but these tend to be younger companies that understand what the emerging consumer seeks through their purchasing decisions.

"Videogames are at the forefront of technology and innovation, and that's where our global youth want to be. Companies like Humble Bundle recognise their greatest opportunity for success is to tailor their products to this connected audience, so it makes sense there are more charity opportunities within the industry overall."

The reasons for the game industry's forward-thinking acceptance of charitable concerns, and its ability to fold them into day-to-day business in such a magnanimous way, are complex and manifold. But the impetus driving players to keep raising and giving money – long after the point has been proven that videogames might be a force for good after all – is easier to understand.

"I think people just see the good that it's doing," says Eriksen. "We hear a lot from our supporters who say things like, 'I spent years in hospital growing up and I was lucky enough that I had a Game Boy. I know how important that was to me, and so I want to make sure that anybody else who is in that same situation has that and more.' That's a big part of it: they can see the effect of giving back, and a lot of them have been the beneficiary of someone else who came before them, and said, 'I know that this sucks right now, but here's a game, this will take your mind off it.'"

That ripple effect was aptly demonstrated at this year's Awesome Games Done Quick. Prior to TGH's show-stopping *Undertale* finale, another speedrunner, BubblesDelFuego, performed a problematic run through *Dark Souls III*, which saw the game's AI refuse to cooperate with certain tricks, and a crash caused by an out-of-bounds glitch. He got there in the end, and during a short speech after his run revealed that he watched a *Dark Souls* speedrun from 2013's AGDQ while in remission following treatment for Hodgkin's lymphoma. Performing at AGDQ was his way of giving back.

The impact of the work carried out by developers, charities and players is significant and far reaching. And it's a contribution to society that continues to grow each year thanks to the unique combination of technology, generosity, community spirit and empathy that seems to go hand in hand with the videogame industry and its player communities.

"At our annual cheque-giving ceremony, not only do we hand over big fat cheques, but we also give the charities a chance to tell their stories of how GamesAid money is being put to use," McGarrigan says. "There's always a moment when you realise the true impact. I worked with a charity called MAPS [Mentoring, Advocacy And Peer Support]. They told us about a young person who was going through a really difficult time in her life. She was caring for her mum, dropping out of school, and there was a moment where she was going to give up and was contemplating suicide. GamesAid money meant that she had the support to sit down with a mentor each week and talk to somebody about it. She finished her GCSEs, and she's now in college. And that's when it really, really hits home that what we can do as an industry is quite amazing." ■

"SHE WAS CONTEMPLATING SUICIDE. GAMESAID MONEY MEANT SHE HAD THE SUPPORT TO SIT DOWN WITH A MENTOR EACH WEEK AND TALK"



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505 Games brand manager Erik Heiberg

THE MAKING OF...



50 CENT: BLOOD ON THE SAND

How airport thrillers and town-centre shopping trips birthed one of gaming's most surprising shooters

By Ed Smith

Developer Swordfish Studios
Publisher THQ
Format 360, PS3
Origin UK
Release 2009

The brand was popular, the fanbase was established and the leading stars were all well known: Covert-One, a new television series adapted from books by Robert Ludlum, surely couldn't fail. For Swordfish, the Birmingham indie studio contracted to build Covert-One's tie-in videogame, a seemingly guaranteed success like this was rare. Founded in 2002, Swordfish had collaborated with three different publishers in its first three years, and its games – particularly *Cold Winter*, a firstperson shooter launched in 2005 – had been well received. But searching for a new idea and a new employer each time a project concluded was a draining routine. The prospect of working on something like *Covert-One*, particularly when Ludlum's Jason Bourne was still thriving in cinemas, was irresistible.

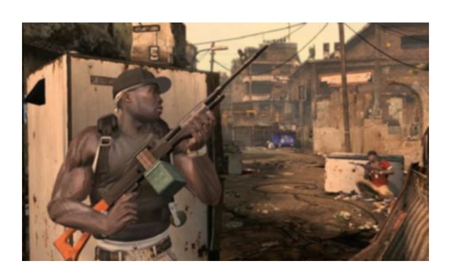
Then, in early 2007, the Covert-One TV show was cancelled, and Swordfish's game along with it. For almost a year, the studio had been working on a thirdperson shooter-cum-murder mystery that it felt was perfectly tailored to Ludlum's world. To discard all that work would be an enormous waste. Fortunately Vivendi, which published *Cold Winter* and had selected Swordfish for *Covert-One* in the first place, had another project in waiting. *50 Cent: Bulletproof*, despite receiving some terrible reviews, had sold over one million copies. Perhaps it was time for a follow-up.

"When we first heard, our jaws were on the floor," production director **Ian Flatt** tells us. "It was bizarre. We were an all-Caucasian group of Brummies. We never thought we'd get picked to do something like this."

While some parts of the *Covert-One* project could be repurposed, the game could hardly be recycled wholesale into a star vehicle for Curtis '50 Cent' Jackson. *Blood On The Sand*'s basic movement, aiming and shooting could be brought over from the cancelled project, but Swordfish had to work out how to crowbar a gangster-rap aesthetic into what was once a game about international espionage; less Ludlum, and more bedlam.

"We had to make it less serious," Flatt says of the absurd situation. "We needed to lighten it up, bring some of our own humour into it and be more tongue in cheek with gore and interactive takedowns and things like that."

"I had the odd CD knocking about," says technical director **David Percival**. "A bit of Ice



50 Cent was designed to be more muscular than his real-world counterpart to better fit the action-movie aesthetic

Cube here and there, but it did feel like, 'OK, now we need to get ourselves into this culture.' In *Covert-One* you were basically playing yourself. Now we had this celebrity we had to glorify. So the first thing we did was make a vertical-slice level – something that had all the major gameplay elements, showed off the graphics, and so on. We wanted to keep that

"OUR JAWS WERE ON THE FLOOR. WE NEVER THOUGHT WE'D GET PICKED TO DO SOMETHING LIKE THIS"

as small as possible so as not to push the team too much right away. We knew that we could iterate it later on.

"As for our cover mechanics, we already had a character who could dive into cover, dive over cover, and aim at an enemy and pop back down again. So for *Blood On The Sand* we just had to remake his animations, meaning that when the character jumped into cover it was in a more ostentatious, rap-hero kind of way. It had to be something Vivendi could put in front of the talent – 50 and the G-Unit guys – and say, 'This is what we're talking about.' That's why we also wanted to nail a realistic-looking 50 Cent avatar early on. We knew it would help seal the deal."

Feedback from 50 Cent and his fellow G-Unit members arrived at regular intervals. Every few months Swordfish would collate all of its work into a 'big release' demonstration, which Vivendi would show to the titular hip-hop artist and his entourage. Described by Percival as "completely normal and very personable," 50 Cent would play through each of the big-release builds and offer feedback and critique. It was a straightforward, amiable process – most of the time, at least.

"There was one milestone where our guys had to fly over to present the build to 50 Cent and his management team," Flatt says. "He wanted his son, who was about six or seven at the time, to be the person who would review the build and decide if it was any good. So he played it and was saying, 'I love this, I love this, it's great! But I want a level with helicopters in!' Our guy explained it was a thirdperson shooter and didn't have helicopters in. But 50 Cent's son said, 'No, I want helicopters,' and 50 Cent turned around and said, 'You heard him. Make a level with helicopters in.'"

Creating bespoke tech to implement these requests was unfeasible, so the staff cobbled together what they could from what was already available to them, Percival explains. "Those interlude levels, where you're driving or being chased by bad guys and watching explosive set-pieces around you, required a huge amount of AI and technology work. We had to get cars working and bumping into each other; make AI that would fight you while driving; create audio for engines and collision sounds. [It required] a huge amount of mechanics and work just for small sections of gameplay that were completely useless for the core shooter part. The helicopter level was even worse: we basically made it out of bits we had in the shoebox, and the designers stitched it all together themselves. There was no extra code work done for it at all. It was a pain to debug."

Creating *Blood On The Sand*'s environment and level art required just as much improvisation, and no small amount of wrangling. The majority of the game's environmental art had been assigned to freelancers, and the difficulty of gathering together the efforts of dozens of artists was further exacerbated by *Blood On The Sand*'s foreign setting. Lacking primary research sources for Middle-Eastern market squares, alleyways and buildings, Swordfish's artists were forced to get creative.

"We were taking our cues from the heavily graded and filtered look found in films like Traffic or Black Hawk Down," art director **Michel** ▶

Bowes says. "We wanted something cinematic, lush and colourful, too. We didn't have the luxury of location reference gathering – but we did have Birmingham. So we took a lot of photos, both of the local shopping mall and the Alexandra theatre, and those are what we used to inspire the game's spaces."

Recording *Blood On The Sand*'s dialogue proved similarly problematic. While 50 Cent was already in the process of transitioning from music to movies and trying to forge a career as an actor during the game's production (Percival: "Giving him lines and direction, and asking for X amount of variations of a scene, went really well – he just rattled them off"), the rest of the G-Unit crew were less interested in acting and harder to track down. The in-game representations of Lloyd Banks, Tony Yayo and DJ Whoo Kid were supposed to quip at the player and provide hints on how to progress in the singleplayer campaign. But scheduling recording time to fit in with their various other projects was no small task.

The game's AI and gameplay coders weren't quite so reliant on external factors, but the project's switch from spy thriller to gangster warfare certainly posed its fair share of unique challenges. "They needed to hit these tenets of what we felt a gangster-rap game ought to feel like," Flatt says. "For example, we wanted to create these takedowns and counter kills. But for the longest time, when you performed them in the game, the background would drop out and you'd only be able to see them happening in what looked like this separate, ethereal world. We could have left them like that, but it would have been a cop-out. To get those right we had to blow a lot of our production deadlines."

"We laughed about the game every day," Percival adds. "But that didn't mean we didn't take it seriously. As an independent studio you're only ever as good as your last game, so no matter what we thought about the subject matter we had to make something good underneath."

Despite its efforts, Swordfish faced uncertainty toward the end of *Blood On The Sand*'s time in development. Repurposing *Covert-One*, then customising a game engine, rounding up art and audio work – all challenges that suddenly seemed insignificant in the face of what was to come. The game was scheduled for release in 2009, but in July 2008 Vivendi completed its merger with Activision. The upper management at what was now named Activision Blizzard decided that its portfolio no longer required a game about 50 Cent. Percival, Flatt and team were told to continue production on the off-chance another publisher could be found, but the cheques from Vivendi would no longer arrive. For months thereafter, Swordfish was working for free.

At the same time, the studio was finalising a deal with Codemasters: once *Blood On The Sand* had shipped, Swordfish would be renamed Codemasters Birmingham and begin working on the *F1* series. It was a promising arrangement, but between losing a publisher, trying to find another, and becoming part of a third company – all while trying to finish and ship a game it had been working on for three years – Swordfish was under tremendous pressure.

"In my whole career I've never known a set of circumstances that difficult," Flatt says. "Everyone had been given a redundancy notice and told that not only would they no longer be working on the game for Vivendi, but that the entire quality-assurance team, which worked for the publisher, would also be going away. At the same time, a lot of our team had already moved onto *F1 2010* and Codemasters was calling – it felt like every day – asking when *Blood On The Sand* was going to be finished. Finishing a new game is always an emotional time and that feeling, combined with everything else that was going on, was frightening. But, on the flipside, it was also the most heartening part of development. Seeing everyone sticking together and getting the game finished – I don't think I'll ever have that same sense of [camaraderie] again."

"Everyone, really, should have been looking around for other jobs," Percival adds. "But regardless of all these political worries on the outside, at that point in the project we were so busy we almost couldn't think of anything else. So we got on with it. We still pride ourselves on being a close-knit team. Our chips were really down, and we stuck together."

In the end THQ purchased the rights to *Blood On The Sand*. The game launched in February 2009 to a pleasantly surprised response, and Swordfish completed its transformation into Codemasters Birmingham. What, then, of 50 Cent and G-Unit? Neither Flatt nor Percival have any idea whether they enjoyed the game. "Vivendi, which had been our channel to those guys, had already gone out the door," Percival says. "So we didn't get any direct feedback." During an interview with ESPN, however, the rapper did explain that he "can't get enough of my game. I'm jumping out of helicopters with all these huge muscles. I love it."

"This was an odd project," Percival says, "to the point of it being ridiculous. But that didn't mean we didn't want to make it good. We knew people would be interested straight away because 50 Cent was on the box, but we still wanted a solid shooter with good cover mechanics – you could have put another character in there and it would have stood up. I suppose if Kim Kardashian ever wants to do a shooter, we can sort that out." ■





Ian Flatt
Production director

What was it like for Swordfish abandoning *Covert-One* and moving on to *Blood On The Sand*?
Given that show's cast we thought, 'We're onto a winner here, it has no chance of failing.' But it just didn't hit at all. However, Swordfish had always worked that way. It came from a mentality we had starting out as a small indie, when we had to be lean to survive. Everyone was very flexible and prepared to reset and go at a new title from a new angle.

How often would you hear from 50 Cent or the G-Unit while you were making the game?
Originally we made a kind of proof of concept, particularly based around the setting, to show we could put the 50 Cent character in there and make it work and make sense. After that there were set points, normally around the big release builds, that they'd be shown the game by one of our guys and provide their feedback and critique, and we'd go away and work based off of that. 'We like this, we don't like that, next build we want to see some things improved, some things removed,' and so on.

How do you feel about the game, particularly the final part of development, in hindsight?
It worked out OK so it's easy to remember those times as nicer than they were. But those driving levels didn't work until very late in the day and it was the first time for us that we'd had to rely on a lot of outsourcing. We had maybe four months left to go on it when Activision and Vivendi merged and decided that several studios – almost everyone in Europe, in fact – were going to be dropped and sold off to other publishers. It's testament to the team that they stayed and finished the game.





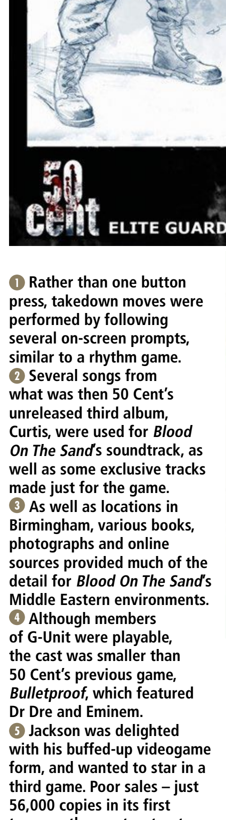


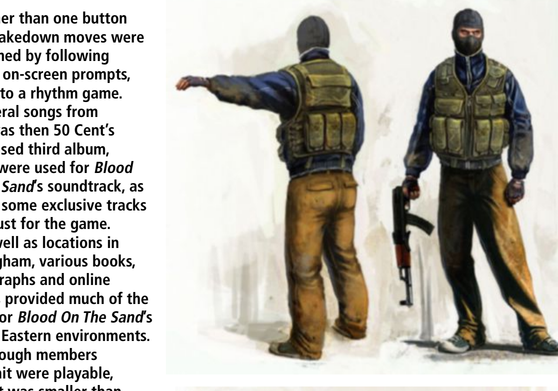






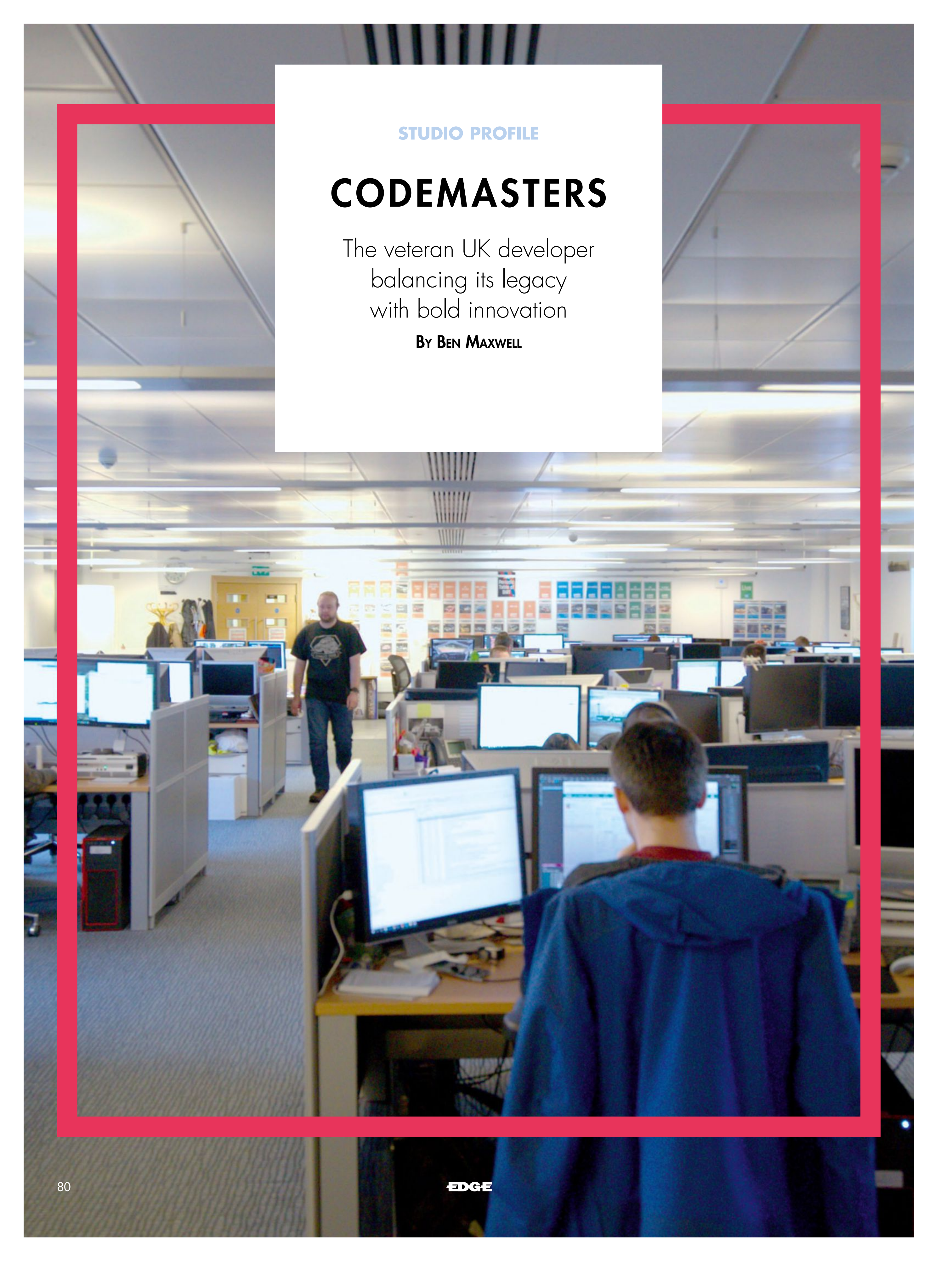
1 Rather than one button press, takedown moves were performed by following several on-screen prompts, similar to a rhythm game.
2 Several songs from what was then 50 Cent's unreleased third album, Curtis, were used for *Blood On The Sand*'s soundtrack, as well as some exclusive tracks made just for the game.
3 As well as locations in Birmingham, various books, photographs and online sources provided much of the detail for *Blood On The Sand*'s Middle Eastern environments.
4 Although members of G-Unit were playable, the cast was smaller than 50 Cent's previous game, *Bulletproof*, which featured Dr Dre and Eminem.
5 Jackson was delighted with his buffed-up videogame form, and wanted to star in a third game. Poor sales – just 56,000 copies in its first two months – put a stop to that. He optioned the film rights to *Saints Row* in 2009, but hasn't spoken of it since.
6 Many of the character concepts were designed by John McCambridge, who would later work on People Can Fly's *Bulletstorm*











STUDIO PROFILE

CODEMASTERS

The veteran UK developer balancing its legacy with bold innovation

By Ben Maxwell



Founded 1987
Employees 400
Key staff Frank Sagnier (CEO), Mick Hocking (VP, product development), Clive Moody (senior executive producer), Paul Rustchynsky (game director), Ian Flatt (executive producer), Steve Root (VP, development creative services)
URL www.codemasters.com
Selected softography *Dirt* series, *Grid* series, *F1* series, *TOCA* series, *Colin McRae Rally* series, *Micro Machines* series
Current projects *Dirt 4*, *Micro Machines World Series*, *F1 2017*, unannounced project

Nobody could be blamed for assuming that *Dirt Rally* was an aside. An initially scrappy, early-access effort, it abandoned Codemasters' penchant for slick UIs and frictionless accessibility in favour of exposed scaffolding and a brutally unforgiving driving model. It couldn't have been further from its forebears – even *Dirt 3*, which pulled focus on wet and windy European rally events over the brash Americanism that has increasingly defined the series, was made to feel lightweight. At the time, this unnumbered diversion into hardcore-sim territory seemed unlikely to be representative of a new direction for *Dirt*.

But it turns out that *Rally* was actually a skunkworks project, not just an experiment; and while the recently announced *Dirt 4* certainly embraces a more familiar level of accessibility, *Rally*'s DNA permeates the whole game. More than that, however, it represents something of a turning point for the entire studio.

"Codies has seen a lot of change over the last three to five years," senior executive producer **Clive Moody** tells us. "It's not a lie to say there have been more difficult times over that period, but we're really coming out of that in a big way now. It feels like there's a huge renaissance going on within the organisation."

Said rebirth has ushered in a new wave of success for the studio, and a reinvigorated sense of creative freedom. Both *Dirt Rally* and *F1 2016* (the latter created at Codemasters' Birmingham studio) were met with huge critical and public acclaim, and Codemasters recently bolstered its staff line-up when it acquired Evolution Studios' development team after Sony closed what was left of the *Driveclub* creator. All of this, together with a management reshuffle, has put the team at Codemasters firmly on the front foot.

"Success really does breed success," Moody says. "People thrive on that positive feedback and that gives everybody a boost. The new exec team, who've been in place now for a couple of years, are very product focused, but in the *right* way. They understand dev, they understand what we go through, they understand that we need the time, space, and empowerment to do what's right for the games. Of course, there's a steer in terms of what the market's going to be and the audience that we need to be aiming for, but we're given an awful lot of rope – which we hopefully won't hang ourselves with."

This new ethos isn't only proving healthy for Codemasters' employees, but also for the


Moody and Coleman in front of Codemasters' Southam HQ, which sports its own lakeside pub and a recently added gym

longterm future of its games. "I think in the past it was very easy for people to fill in a roadmap of releases, and just say, 'This is where we'll be making the money,'" chief game designer **Paul Coleman** says. "But now I think there's a lot more of a feeling that there's a protection element to each franchise, as well as using it to make money. There were definitely times where the remit came down at a very late point to suddenly have to knock out another *Dirt* game when previously it hadn't existed within any kind of

"WHEN YOU LOOK AT WHERE THE PASSION LIES, IT ALWAYS COMES BACK TO DRIVING AND RACING"

plan, and to suddenly pivot as a studio and deliver that.

"Clive and I both experienced that with *Dirt Showdown*, which was a nine-month dev cycle from high-level design to shelf, more or less. That was pretty tight by any stretch of the imagination, and as unpleasant as I think you'd ever want it to be. Yes we turned it around, and yes there was a lot of camaraderie, but I guess it was a bit like being in a prisoner-of-war camp, rather than an enjoyable dev environment."

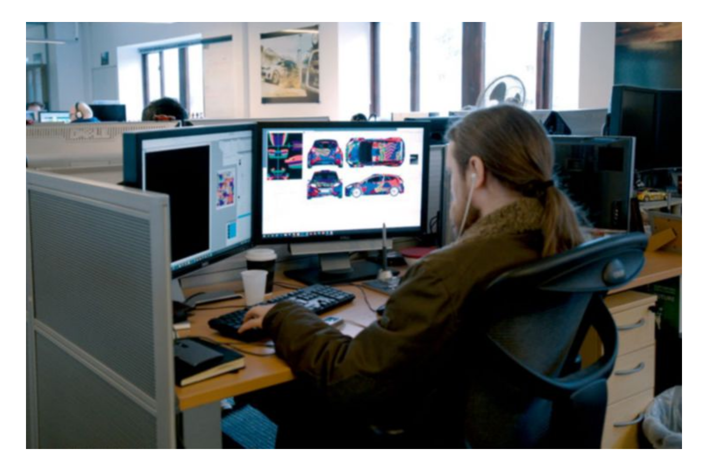
Your Stage, the powerful tech behind *Dirt 4*'s procedurallygenerated tracks, is a striking example of the potential benefits of Codemasters' shift in focus. "It probably wouldn't have happened in the old days when Codemasters was a bit more of a production line," Moody says. "Now it's just not like that. Your Stage has had a really long gestation period – I mean, we were thinking about something of that nature after *Dirt 3*, and that was way back in 2011. It's taken a long time: background R&D, just chipping away at that problem, waiting for some of the technology to reach the point where we could do what we needed to do with it. I think that in itself speaks very well to where Codies is at right now, and what the culture is. And it can only get better, I think, from here on in. It feels like we've got our mojo back."

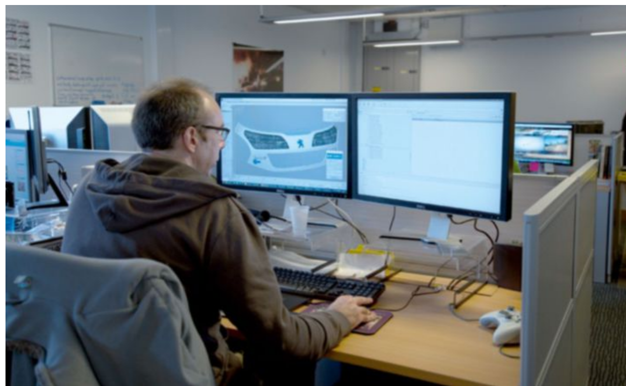
The studio's return to form has also gone hand in hand with a return to what it does best: racing games. *Dirt 4* will arrive first, in June; the Birmingham studio is working on new *F1* and *Micro Machines* games; and the team of former Evolution staff is beavering away on its next big idea. There isn't a sports game, FPS or – thank goodness – egg-based platformer in sight.

"Obviously, Codies has tried a lot of different genres over the years, some of them successfully, some of them – let's be honest – less successfully," Moody admits. "But I suppose the core of Codemasters right now is something which goes back to the heritage of the business: having a real focus on the racing genre. Right now it's all we're doing, and it's all we're planning on doing for the foreseeable future.

"Ultimately, when you look at where the passion lies within the organisation, it always comes back to driving and racing. So that's what we're about right now. We've got a really great portfolio of racing titles, and that's going to grow as a part of that focus."

Shoring up its position as a leading racing-game specialist hasn't meant a blanket return to old design principles, however. Your Stage is certainly one example of a new way of thinking at the studio, but Moody and Coleman also ▶





The *Dirt* team sits in mixed disciplines across two large, open-plan rooms. The studio lies within 43 acres of farmland which, while remote, makes for a rather peaceful atmosphere

point to an increased desire to embrace feedback from players (as evidenced by *Dirt Rally*'s debut as an early-access game) and a pull back from the atmospheric, but busy, UI excesses that have crept into the studio's recent games.

"I think we've perhaps strayed a bit too far down the path of making the UI the star of the show," Coleman admits. "In some circumstances the game has almost taken a backseat to that. A lot of what we've done recently has been about re-finding our feet in terms of putting the player experience first and foremost, and the immediacy with which they can get into that experience and get enjoyment out of it.

"Having said that, I think you can still make a really light menu and the game will suffer as a result – because it doesn't have the production values that make you feel warm from the moment you press Start. So there's definitely a balancing act to be performed. I'm proud to have been part of those products that did have absolutely award-winning user interfaces, but I'm glad that we've also now found the right balance between industry-leading graphical interfaces and the on-track experience."

One aspect of Codemasters' approach that hasn't changed, however, is the fearlessness with which it approaches each new entry in an established series. Games such as *Dirt: Showdown* might have been created in unfavourable conditions, but the studio has long taken an uncommonly brave, perhaps even reckless approach to experimenting with new angles, reshaping – and indeed rebooting – established series with seemingly no concern over the inherent commercial risks of doing so.

"It *is* a risky approach, and it doesn't always come off – I have to say, we don't always get it right," Moody says. "But the alternative is standing still and just turning over the same old, same old, which isn't going to get you anywhere. If all you do is deliver the exact same experience, maybe a little shinier, you'll end up in decline anyway. People will become tired of a given franchise, and fatigue will set in. You've got to be brave sometimes, and take a few risks, and I think we're really fortunate at Codemasters that as a business [management] allow us the space to take those risks, and support us."

But balancing the expectations of longterm fans with the need to innovate is no easy task, and even though Codemasters has established a pattern of continual reinvention, the legacy of its classics-stuffed back catalogue represents a significant pressure.

"I FEEL THAT THERE HAS OFTEN BEEN TOO MUCH OF A CONNECTION BETWEEN SIMULATION AND DIFFICULTY"

"It's a bit of a double-edged sword, for sure," Coleman says. "But that legacy is why I got into games in the first place. I was at university being an automotive engineer, and I changed my focus based on the enjoyment I was getting from *TOCA* and *Colin McRae*. Then I found out Codemasters was just down the road from Coventry where I was at uni, and just kind of made everything change towards getting into this company. So that heritage is important to me, from a creative perspective, and I know it's very important to a lot of our fanbase. But it's also important to not just try and re-sell the same stuff to the same crowd forever because people move on, things change, and you have to stay relevant. You have to keep looking toward the next big thing."

"All of the lessons we learnt with *Dirt Rally* mean that now we really feel that we can put something pretty spectacular together; a really high-production-value package," Moody adds. "Hopefully that can bust out well beyond the audience which bought into *Dirt Rally* and try and find a much bigger audience. Maybe even some of those lapsed *Dirt 2* and *Dirt 3* players can be brought back into the fold with it, and people beyond that as well."

The shift in player tastes towards simulation-based car handling in recent years also represents a huge opportunity for Codemasters. The studio has a remarkable portfolio of series that are capable of embracing that change, but also boasts extensive experience creating games that span the whole range of driving models. That combined expertise, one suspects, can only strengthen its position over the coming years.

"I personally feel that there has often been too much of a connection between simulation and difficulty, and if a game wasn't hard it couldn't be a simulation," Coleman says. "But when you speak to car engineers and racing drivers, they want a car to drive as effectively as possible – it needs to be as nimble and as controllable as it can be.

"So the exciting thing for us has been to bring our knowledge of racing and move it more to that side of the spectrum. There's definitely a more discerning racing-game player out there that we're hoping to capture, but that's not to say there aren't a lot of other people that just want to drive a car fast and have a lot of fun doing that. It's our job to speak to all of those people." ■



❶ *Micro Machines World Series* is due out in June.
❷ The *Grid* games feature drifting and street racing alongside circuit events.
❸ The much cherished *TOCA* series initially focused on touring car racing, but was rebooted as *Grid*.
❹ *Dirt* has continued where *Colin McRae Rally* left off

PLAY

REVIEWS. PERSPECTIVES. INTERVIEWS. AND SOME NUMBERS

STILL PLAYING

Destiny PS4
The Age Of Triumph, *Destiny*'s final update, seems on first inspection to offer more than enough content to keep us on the hook until the arrival of *Destiny 2*. But the challenges in its Record Book will need dozens of hours of grinding through content we already know too well. Updates to old raids are intriguing, but most of our regular group went their separate ways months ago. The lure of the peerless Vault Of Glass raid, now updated with its old loot at contemporary power levels, means that we're back, yes – but not, we suspect, for too long.

Parappa The Rapper Remastered PS4
We stroll through Chop Chop Master Onion, of course. A driving lesson is no problem for these experienced hands, either, and a dub-reggae challenge at a market stall is no problem either. But then we must bake a cake, and everything falls apart time and again, as already dodgy timing windows are worsened by an HDTV's input latency. We get that the purpose of a remaster is to rekindle old flames, but sometimes a warts-and-all remake will reawaken old nightmares, too.

No Man's Sky PS4
While the prospect of intergalactic travel is undeniably alluring, some of the most enjoyable moments we've spent with this flawed – but steadily improving – game have come from hunkering down on a single planet and exploring it more fully. The Pathfinder update makes that much easier, adding new customisable exocraft – which can now be summoned at any time and are capable of volume-mining with mounted lasers – plus more parts for base construction, and a flexible photo mode.



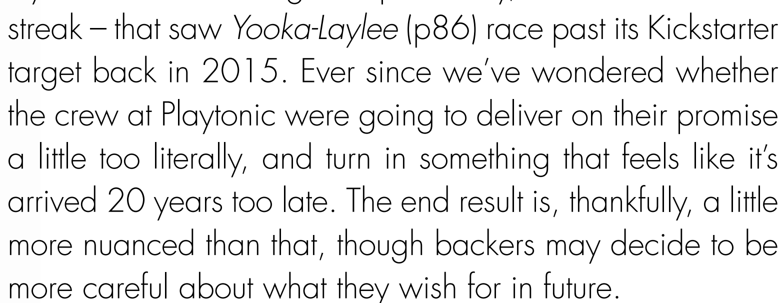
Explore the iPad edition of Edge for extra Play content

REVIEWED THIS ISSUE

Old-school hardcore

As you may have noticed, it's not been the best month for looking behind the times. If we're being kind, at least *Mass Effect Andromeda* (p90) stands out from the crowd, even if it's the way a clapped-out old banger stands out on the forecourt of a Ferrari dealership. The internet reaction to *Andromeda*'s awkward animation and character modelling was, as it always is to these things, equal parts amusing and infuriating. Look beyond the GIFs, though, and you reveal a deeper, more positive truth. Players are simply more discerning than ever – partly because they know more, and partly because games are just getting better and better.

All of which makes it rather awkward to find that this month's Play crop reflects a development community as fixated on the past as it is intrigued by the future. To be fair, it was precisely because of nostalgia – specifically, Rare's mid-'90s hot streak – that saw *Yooka-Laylee* (p86) race past its Kickstarter target back in 2015. Ever since we've wondered whether the crew at Playtonic were going to deliver on their promise a little too literally, and turn in something that feels like it's arrived 20 years too late. The end result is, thankfully, a little more nuanced than that, though backers may decide to be more careful about what they wish for in future.





The spirit of N64-era Rare also appears to be channelled by *Snake Pass* (p96), with its googly-eyed protagonist, its vibrant colour scheme, and its David Wise soundtrack. Yet beneath the friendly exterior is a nails-hard, physics-driven puzzle game we're relieved didn't exist 20 years ago, if only because we were younger and skinter back then and couldn't afford a new N64 to replace the one we'd have just slung out the window. After that, putting up with some old-hat animation work feels like a walk in the park.

Yooka-Laylee

While *Yooka-Laylee* may do a fine job of pretending otherwise, it isn't 1997 anymore. But that's the point. It's why more than 73,000 backers collectively committed over £2m in funding to it, their investment based on a specific promise to recapture the spirit of N64-era mascot platformers 20 years on. And who better than a cadre of ex-Rare staff to do it? But Playtonic also assured its supporters it would aim to modernise those creaky ideas a little; to eliminate some of the frustrations of the old games with two additional decades of collective design know-how. Almost inevitably, it has had more success with one of those goals than the other.

At first it's like stepping out of a time machine, albeit one capable of rendering Rare's golden era with nostalgia's forgiving filter, those original blemishes – muddy textures, jagged polys – tastefully airbrushed out. The opening hub area is lively and brightly coloured, while a cutscene introduces the eponymous duo along with antagonists Capital B and Dr Quack (whose evil plan involves the theft of all the world's books) in brisk and amusing fashion. The gibberish speech sounds are familiar; the tunes are authentically jaunty. And Yooka and Laylee themselves are a delight. The former is a quiet, friendly chameleon, the straight man – OK, straight lizard – to a funny, snarky bat companion.

Together, they control and animate beautifully. Yooka grabs his flapping friend's legs when he needs to hover briefly to cross a larger gap between platforms; Laylee jumps on top of her colleague as he tucks into a roll to climb slopes, or just to get around more quickly. Over the course of the game their repertoire develops, taking in a cloaking technique, a sonar shot to stun enemies and activate dormant totems, and, eventually, the ability to fly. These are all bound to an energy gauge that automatically refills after a short while, but which can be instantly topped up by collecting butterflies. These double as health pickups when you've taken damage from falls or collisions with hazards and enemies, but only when snared by Yooka's prehensile tongue. It's a smart idea that factors into a race along a dry riverbed in the game's first world, your path partly determined by the fluttering snacks that line the route. Only by eating enough of them will you have the juice to sustain a non-stop roll to the finish line.

For a while, *Yooka-Laylee* looks like it might have similar momentum. Opening area Tribalstack Tropics is a lush and vibrant jungle world of admirable range and towering verticality. That riverbed will later be filled with water (courtesy of an incontinent cloud) and then frozen over; elsewhere, rustling thickets hide a multitude of secrets and an imposing temple begs to be climbed. Before long you'll have amassed enough of the game's main collectible, Pagies, to make a decision: expand this world, or unlock the next. The former presents you with a colossal monument housing a wide variety of additional objectives and characters. And the whole package is rounded off with a soundtrack that's old-fashioned in the best possible way, as Grant Kirkhope's bouncy and infectious numbers dovetail with David Wise's mellow, layered themes to cheering effect.

Developer Playtonic Games
Publisher Team17
Format PC, PS4 (tested), Switch, Xbox One
Release Out now (Switch TBA)

The almost total lack of guidance can make those little moments of discovery all the more gratifying



The second world's secret, hidden within a Disneyesque ice palace, is possibly even better, a treat for fans of even older games that recalls Gareth Noyce's likeable *Lumo*. Yes, the classic traits of ice worlds are present and correct, though a new ability to assume the state of items you eat means you can slurp sticky honey from a beehive to adhere to slippery ramps. It's another illustration of a laudable commitment to variety. Playtonic insisted that, beyond the collectibles, no two objectives would be alike – and for the most part that's true. Where the previous world transformed you into a pollen-spraying plant, here the pair's DNA is reconfigured into the form of a snowplough, designed primarily to unearth clothes for denuded snowmen.

There are, however, a few signs of trouble to come. At 15 Pagies of a possible 25, we weren't merely wondering how to obtain the rest, but where we should be looking in the first place. Climbing to the top of a level doesn't help much: their sheer size combined with a necessarily limited draw distance means you won't always be able to spot distant quills (of which there's an intimidating tally of 200 per stage), nor Pagies, nor key NPCs. With no map, and few environmental or dialogue clues, underwater areas and interiors need to be combed meticulously for missing pickups and hidden passages. Some challenges aren't accessible until you return with an ability unlocked at a later stage, and it's not always immediately clear you lack the necessary tools until you've failed an objective a few times.

In theory, none of that is a problem for an exploration-focused platformer, and the almost total lack of guidance can make those little epiphanies and moments of discovery all the more gratifying. Equally, it can result in long periods of aimless wandering, particularly once you've unlocked and enlarged all five stages and still find yourself 20 or so Pagies shy of the requirement to access the lift that takes you to the final boss. Playtonic has taken great pains to highlight how *Yooka-Laylee*'s 'expand-or-progress' structure gives the player a degree of freedom over their route through the game, rather than forcing them to complete activities they'd prefer to avoid. Yet by the end, you will in all likelihood need to locate that giggling, invisible ghost for which you'd been vainly scouring the third world, or to complete that mine-cart sequence you'd been putting off with good reason.

If the game's versatility is to be praised, that doesn't mean all objectives are created equal – not least when ▶

ABOVE Recurring characters like Dr Puzz and Trowzer have clearly commanded more time and attention during development than other NPCs. Playtonic has suggested some characters may return in the studio's future games: on this evidence, these two are among the most likely candidates.

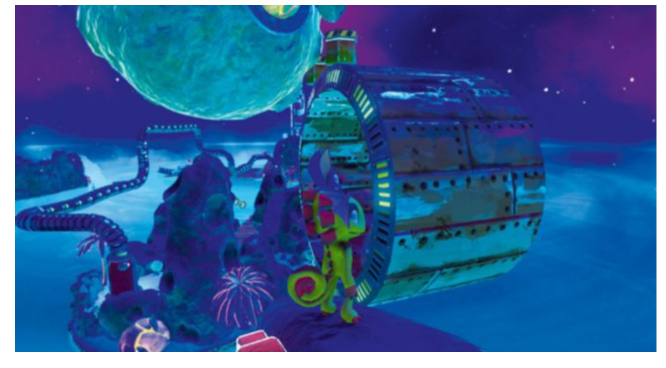


LEFT The idle animations for the two leads are often delightful, and they're supplemented by a series of D-pad emotes: the foot-stomping 'anger' option offers a small cathartic release from the more frustrating objectives

BELOW World five's spaceport is rather sparse before you've fully expanded it. It feels less like you're getting a bonus so much as filling in empty space that shouldn't really have been there in the first place



ABOVE In fourth world Capital Cashino, Yooka and Laylee can assume the form of a helicopter. Its main job, rather surprisingly, is to destroy broken fruit machines, which lets you scoop up the stage's remaining tokens



the rule of three becomes the rule of five, or instakill hazards are suddenly introduced. A degree of trial-and-error design is to be expected given the games Playtonic is aiming to imitate, but that doesn't make some of the more exacting tasks any more palatable. Indeed, the difficulty level is erratic throughout, with some challenges apparently simplified to compensate for design shortcomings. Take, for example, the auto-targeting for Yooka's tongue-lash, a surrogate hookshot that lets him drag objects or grapple across to certain platforms. Its success rate is variable, to say the least, and only a generous score target prevents a star-fishing minigame (catch the falling yellow stars while avoiding the reds) from becoming exasperating. Meanwhile, anything involving jumping and precision aiming simultaneously is a write-off, since projectiles aren't so much launched as dribbled out, requiring you to get uncomfortably close to the object or enemy you're targeting in order to guarantee a hit. Naturally, this idea features heavily in the climax, an extended boss fight you'll be heartily glad to see the back of. Sadly, it's not the only battle that outstays its welcome.

That most players will likely persevere long enough to see the credits speaks volumes for the simple joys of its heroes' movement, the surprising diversity of that ever-broadening hub and those first two worlds, as well as the unabashedly atavistic presentation. For a certain audience, this will undoubtedly feel like a sentimental journey back to those heady days of the late '90s, and Rare's extraordinary hot streak. Yet surely even the most dewy-eyed of players can't fail to ignore the marked downturn in quality during the game's second half, where the struggles of a project whose reach seems to have exceeded its creators' grasp are made plain. With



SAUR THUMB

Rextro, a polygonal Tyrannosaur, pops up on each world to host an arcade challenge, unlocked by locating that world's Play Coin. Beat it and you'll earn a Pagie; top the leaderboard and you'll get another. The games themselves are deliberately old-fashioned in approach – many play like extended *Mario Party* minigames – but in several cases that simplicity belies a frustrating challenge, usually thanks to clumsy controls. All are available to play from the menu and support up to four players, and it's here that the better games come into their own. A capture-the-flag variant, a rudimentary kart racer and a scrap over quills in an icy arena prove surprisingly diverting – even if you might wonder whether Playtonic's limited resources might have been better spent elsewhere.

Though the limitations of Unity are sometimes apparent, *Yooka-Laylee* certainly gives good screenshots. It helps that the HUD vanishes when not required – a rare note of modernity in a work of such nostalgia

hindsight, that was always likely once its crowdfunding campaign smashed its goal, and the team's more modest plans went out the window with it. But it's a curious irony to witness a recurring cameo from Yacht Club Games' *Shovel Knight*, a markedly less ambitious project in many respects, but one whose developer savvily imposed limitations upon itself to ensure the final work would be of a consistently high standard.

By contrast, it's clear Playtonic had to rush to get this shipped, perhaps believing it could make a game with comparable manpower to its Rare heyday in a similar timescale without compromise. Brave, but wrong. That's apparent in effects that look like placeholders, a bafflingly murky third world and phoned-in minigames throughout the fourth. And while the game is keen not to hold your hand, the camera frequently attempts to assert its authority with sharp, aggressive yanks. Whether it's a failure of perspective or of stage design, you'll often find yourself barrelling past entrances, objects and even characters that should really be drawing your eye. Sometimes it's only on a third or fourth pass, when you approach a location from a different angle, that you'll even spot them.

Some of these complaints were true of *Banjo-Kazooie* and its ilk, and in that regard you could argue *Yooka-Laylee* has achieved its main aim, even if it hasn't learned enough lessons from the past. This characterful, sprawling throwback might well have been considered a classic two decades ago. But, as its creators have patently discovered, it isn't 1997 anymore.

6

Post Script

Gavin Price MD, Playtonic Games

Playtonic's founder **Gavin Price** quickly convinced several former colleagues to join his new studio, pitching them an opportunity to work on the kind of game they used to make during Rare's heyday. Here, he discusses *Yooka-Laylee*'s delays and areas to improve on, while expanding on plans for continued support of the game – as well as what's next for the studio.

How did your plans change between the end of the Kickstarter campaign and *Yooka-Laylee*'s launch?
With the Kickstarter stretch goals that we put out, we weren't honestly anticipating to tick them all off, and when we did, we had to put some thought into that, and certain elements like the Tonic system and the co-op mode, for instance. We weren't just thinking about them in terms of [this game]. We had to think in terms of the whole Playtonic universe, and ask ourselves what we wanted to do with those features from game to game; these are elements that are going to exist with us throughout a lot of our games. With the Tonics we have our own internal perk and achievement system. And with the co-op mode, we really liked it when we finally came up with The Bee Team, but it was a bit late in the day to maximise the opportunity with them. So we've kind of introduced them but we thought it would be even greater to give them more cool abilities in the future. Like when you see bee swarms in cartoons, and they make the shape of a hammer above a character's head to hit them – I always found that funny because bees could sting you if they wanted to. With features like that, it's actually set us up well to expand on them in the future and do even more.

Delaying the game past its initial delivery date must have been a difficult choice. Did you consider postponing it further?
That first delay occurred because we did our own internal review on the game, and it took us absolutely *ages* to do the first level. We hadn't quite realised how big the game was. And then we did the other [worlds], and the whole review process took ages. We had an internal quality bar we wanted to hit consistently throughout the game, and we knew we were going to have to take longer polishing it all. Having known what we'd promised with the Kickstarter, we had this huge commitment to deliver on that vision as well. We made a thorough assessment on how much longer it would take so we didn't have to announce a second delay.

Did you feel any pressure from your backers at that stage to determine a fixed release date?
I know what you're saying, and you'd think that'd be the case, but it was actually the opposite. All the time our backers were saying, 'Take as long as you want' – which every developer would always love to do, I assure you. But we had this commitment to only spend the Kickstarter money. We wanted to remain in full control of the budget and other than what we had to put aside for things like code fulfilment and physical goods and shipping we worked out that the money would run out. We said, 'If we want to stay completely independent and fully in control of our destiny, that's the point in time we have to get this game done by.'



"But we'll probably have to put a bit more structure in if we're to really improve our craft, which we all want to do"



With hindsight, is there anything in particular you would have done differently?
Yeah, I'm a real harsh critic of us. I've only ever seen the bad stuff in the games I've released. Already we're discussing how we [should] do internal reviews sooner and more frequently, how we nail down exactly what we're trying to achieve with everything we're doing, so we can have everyone pulling in the same direction with regards to what's going on in the level spatially and how much detail there is in certain places. You can put so much more detail into a level, but sometimes it goes against the legibility. It's been an opportunity for us where we've all been creatively free and left to our own devices, and synced up when we needed to on this project. But we'll probably have to put a bit more structure in if we're to really improve our craft, which we all want to do – we all want to get better at making games. We won't have overbearing management processes and structures, it's just about making sure we're all playing the game earlier during development and have time to jump on stuff that we spot.

You've clearly got one eye on the future, so what's next for *Yooka-Laylee* and Playtonic?
We've thought about a sequel, and we've thought about other stuff as well. We've got our eyes on so many genres, and we're actually trying to figure out how to do everything we want to do in a timely manner. It's too early to specifically say anything about what exactly we're going to do next, but we've got some options open to us, which means hopefully – even though our eyes are bigger than our bellies – we can become this multi-game company that we want to be. And I think it's important to show that you love your game even though it's out. So we'll have some internal discussions over what we want to put in. We're big fans of speedruns in the office, so there's been some talk of having an official speedrun mode, as well as thinking about extra game content which delivers more unique things and fixing performance issues if and when they arise. We still want to show a lot of love for this game. We're not just going to forget about it. ■

Mass Effect: Andromeda

Every *Mass Effect* game is the product of experimentation and compromise. The central proposition of these games – a space opera that you control – has held steady. Yet BioWare has never settled on the type of game that should be built around that ambition. Is it an RPG? A linear thirdperson shooter? An open-world game? With each new entry, these parameters have shifted. *Andromeda* represents another attempt to answer those questions – and again BioWare has some, but not all, of the answers.

The latest entry uproots the series and transplants it to a new galaxy, 600 years after Shepard's campaign to defeat the Reapers. You play as Ryder, a young explorer who's thrust into the role of Pathfinder – a combination of soldier, scout, diplomat and researcher – for the Andromeda Initiative, an effort to find a new home for the races of the Milky Way in Andromeda's Heleus Cluster. All is not well in Heleus, as ark ships full of cryo-frozen colonists find themselves contending with ancient alien relics and a hostile race called the Kett.

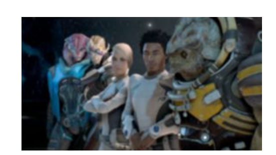
Despite this new galactic frontier, much about *Andromeda* is familiar. The Milky Way races bring home with them, assembling a new space station called the Nexus that stands in for the Citadel. Colonists include the Asari, Turian, Salarian and Krogan, some of who serve as companions and crew on Ryder's ship, the Tempest – a smaller, slicker, exploration-tuned version of Shepard's Normandy. Even Andromeda mirrors the Milky Way in several respects. Ancient Remnant tech recalls the original trilogy's Protheans, and the locals adhere to the Star Trek-honouring tradition of being essentially just weird-looking people.

This puts *Andromeda*'s opening hours in the awkward position of reintroducing the familiar while also introducing the supposedly-but-not-really unfamiliar. Both pace and plot struggle to overcome these early hurdles, requiring the player to meet the game more than halfway. BioWare's love for ever-larger open worlds packed with fetch quests doesn't help, throwing scattered objectives at an already-cluttered UI as Ryder makes landfall on his or her first alien world.

It gets better, however – a lot better. You'll play through a substantial amount of story, and potentially invest even more time exploring each planet, before you really hit the meat of what traditionally comprises a *Mass Effect* game. There are loyalty missions for your crew, vital side plots, and marvellous set-pieces to be discovered, but it could easily take 40 hours or more before you see any of them. The upside is that the things you expect from a *Mass Effect* game are here, incorporated into a game of greater scope than any previous entry in the series. The downside is that they're gated off by mid-campaign plot developments that easily distracted, or completionist, players may take many hours to reach.

Developer BioWare
Publisher EA
Format PC (tested), PS4, Xbox One
Release Out now

Andromeda demonstrates the way the studio's craft has matured; it just buries the lede a few dozen hours into the game



SPACE CO-OPERATE
Andromeda's co-op multiplayer mode mirrors its counterpart in *Mass Effect 3* in many respects. You and your team take on waves of enemies in small, cover-packed arenas, sometimes with other objectives to complete along the way. New character classes, weapons and upgrades are unlocked through loot boxes, which can either be earned at a relatively rapid pace or bought for real money. *Andromeda*'s fundamentally strong combat system is shown in a flattering light here, with the new movement abilities permitting more dramatic acts of heroism than were possible in *Mass Effect 3*. Your success or failure in multiplayer feeds acquired resources back into the singleplayer campaign, though it has little bearing on the overall arc of the story.

This is a trade-off that positions *Andromeda* in opposition to *Mass Effect 2*, which provided exciting moments and character development at a steadier clip. Given that *ME2* was the point at which the original series came alive for most, this is a questionable change of direction. It's a shame because *Andromeda*'s character writing is among the most accomplished in the series, and in Ryder it finds a more nuanced protagonist than Shepard. In true BioWare tradition these moments are contrasted against some truly dire dialogue, and the main plot lacks the impetus of Shepard's against-all-odds crusade. Even so, *Andromeda* demonstrates the way the studio's craft has matured; it just buries the lede a few dozen hours into the game.

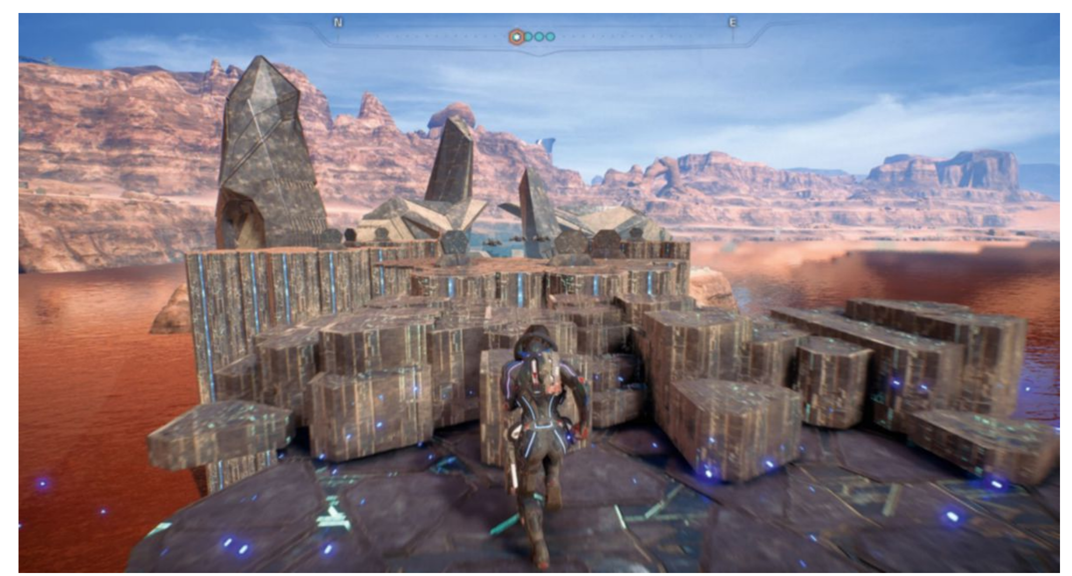
Combat is much improved, too, marking the most successful reconciliation of the series' RPG and shooter roots. Extensive character and gear upgrade options change the way you and your guns operate, allowing you to construct your own playstyle as you progress. Your choices also unlock profiles, which are top-level bonuses tied to specific approaches to fighting. Despite being limited to three powers at a time, loadouts and profiles can be saved as favourites and switched out on the fly during combat. It's a liberating alternative to the restrictive, class-based system of previous *Mass Effects*.

Ryder has a rocket-powered jump and dodge, which encourages you to get out from behind cover and engage with enemies in a more dynamic way. Biotic charges can be chained into shotgun blasts, leaps into powerful melee strikes, and sideways boosts into aerial sniper takedowns. When you're being asked to invest upwards of 50 hours into a game with *ME*'s repetitive underlying structure, improvements like these are vital.

However, there are, in the series tradition, caveats aplenty. Stiff and sometimes glitchy animation mars a succession of what should be important dramatic moments, and inconsistent performance and texture pop-in can spoil a frequently spectacular open world. Small quality-of-life issues add up over the course of a long campaign, from voice lines being cut off by invisible triggers to a fussy UI that can never seem to rid itself of its 'unread message' notifications. Though many of *Andromeda*'s weaknesses are the result of its experimental approach to the series' fundamentals, these issues suggest that BioWare needed more time to smooth out the sharp distinction between *Andromeda*'s peaks and troughs. Its premature launch, a convenient fortnight before the close of EA's financial year, has resulted in an inconsistent piece of work that has little chance of reaching the heights of its predecessors at their best. An earnest attempt has been made to create a new identity for a series here, but the question of how to best frame *Mass Effect*'s narrative strengths is, once again, left open.

7

RIGHT Remnant ruins are a common occurrence across planets in Heleus, often dramatically revealing themselves when the right conditions are met. Ancient alien monoliths are becoming something of a cliché, however. **MAIN** Power usage is much more involved than in previous games, although you have less control over your squadmates. As a trade-off, Ryder is more than capable of setting up combos by herself. **BOTTOM** The Nomad mimics *ME1*'s Mako tank in some respects, but is unarmed and less prone to flipping over. Its presence makes open world zones feel less MMOG-ish than those in *Dragon Age: Inquisition*

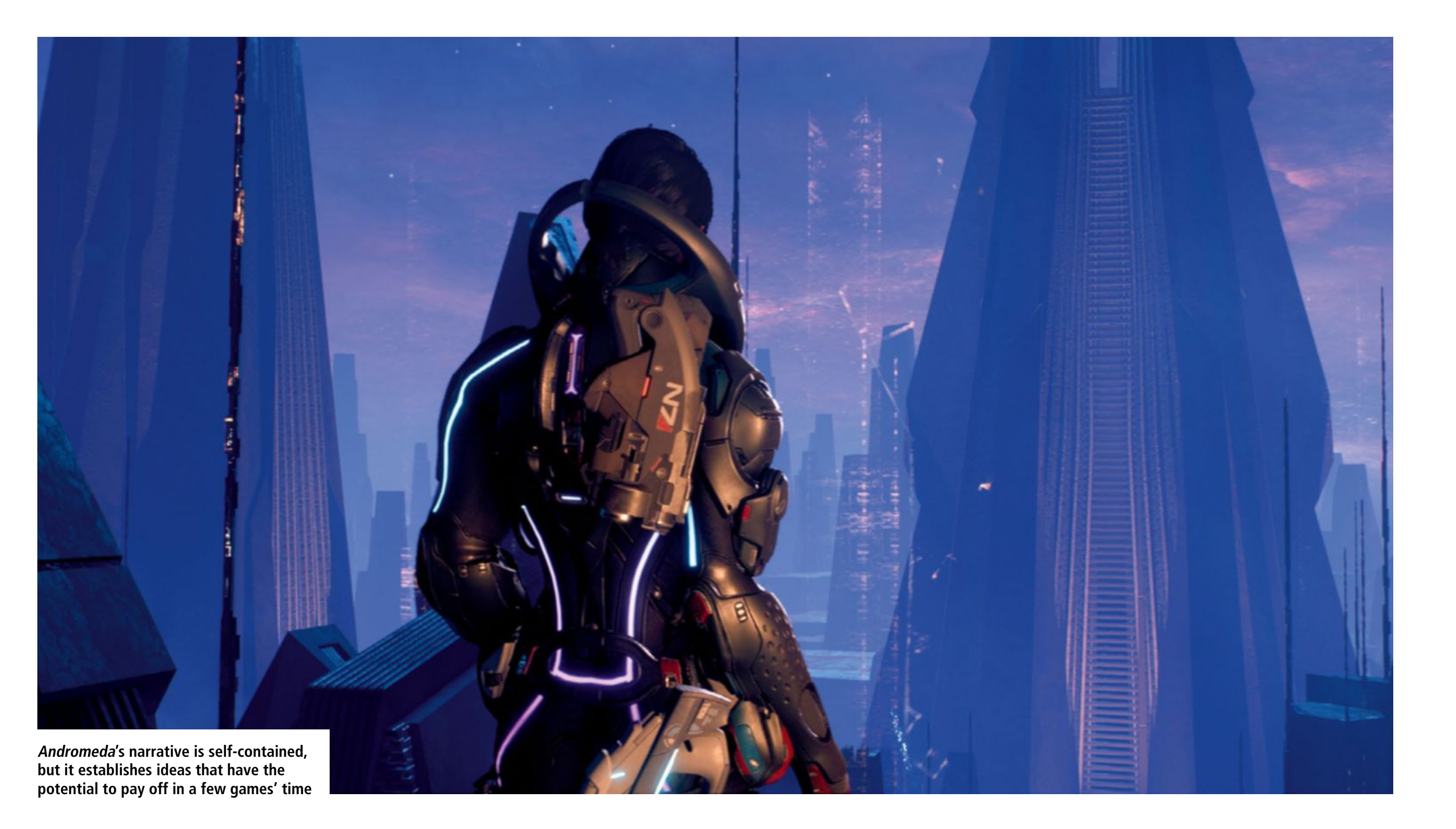








ABOVE As we go to press BioWare has announced a new patch which, the studio says, will improve Andromeda's lip-sync and facial animation. Coming so soon after release, one wonders why it wasn't in place at launch ▶



Andromeda's narrative is self-contained, but it establishes ideas that have the potential to pay off in a few games' time

Post Script

Legacy reboot mode

No single feature defines the original *Mass Effect* trilogy more than the ability to import your decisions from one game to the next. The idea isn't unique to the series – it appears in the *Baldur's Gate* and *Dragon Age* games too – but it has specific importance to *Mass Effect* because it allows three very different games to cohere into a tangible whole. The first *Mass Effect* is a hybrid RPG-shooter heavy on exploration, the second a cover shooter with a personality-led, episodic plot structure. The third builds out that shooter into a more rounded action game about dealing with the consequences of series-spanning decisions.

Your sense of Shepard's character, and your awareness of the importance of your choices, are the only reasons why the series possesses such a strong singular identity. They're what make *Mass Effect* so meaningful to so many people, putting it in the unusual position of being a game series that is more accurately judged as a whole than on the basis of the strengths of one specific entry. If your favourite companion is Wrex then you are likely not thinking about one line of dialogue in *Mass Effect 2*, but your sense of a journey from *Mass Effect* through to the triumphant or tragic denouement of the character's arc in *Mass Effect 3*. The difference between being angry about a game's ending and being petition-writingly angry about a game's ending is three full games' worth of setup. *Mass Effect* is a trilogy first, a game second.

Until *Andromeda*, that is. It's hard to underestimate just how vast a challenge BioWare was setting itself when it decided to return to this universe. While the business case for a *Mass Effect* sequel is straightforward, making it happen while still respecting the boundaries of the original fiction is not. Furthermore, despite being a slow-burning first entry in what has the potential to be a new series, its audience's most recent memory of *Mass Effect* is the third game – an instalment defined by explosive finales and dramatic payoffs. *Andromeda* is most accurately and fairly compared to the first *Mass Effect*, but realistically it has to compete with the memory of the original trilogy as a monolithic whole.

This issue is an unavoidable consequence of *Andromeda*'s distinct heritage. The trilogy whose success made a sequel inevitable also set a high bar for player investment that a fresh start can't realistically match. To some extent, the game's divisive reception can be explained by the mismatch between what *Andromeda* sets out to do, which is to provide the foundation for a new trilogy in this setting, and what it's expected to do – follow *Mass Effect 3*.

But on its own merits, *Andromeda* gets a lot right. Its RPG and combat systems are the series' best; it's funny, diverse and detailed; and it lays the groundwork for future growth while telling a self-contained story with a strong ending. Issues with pacing and technical performance hold it back, but *Andromeda* still amounts to a successful second pass at the same ambitions that defined *Mass Effect*: character drama alongside expansive sci-fi landscapes; a shooter worthy of the term; and a foundation of meaningful, RPG-style character progression. Yet there's a sense that it's no longer enough to 'just' be a good first *Mass Effect* game, and that feeling has the power to generate a backlash.

The future of the series feels uncertain. It would be a shame if Ryder were denied the same process of iteration and improvement that created such strong sentiment around Shepard's trilogy, but *Andromeda*'s core fundamentals are strong enough that it doesn't require the kind of top-down rethink *Mass Effect 2* imposed on the original game. It follows a similar course, and busily stores your choices for future games. Yet the real question is whether this uncertain start means BioWare will ever get to use them. ■

Little Nightmares

You might want to give your TV a clean first. As Six, a young and frail girl in a bright-yellow raincoat, you awake groggily in a world enveloped in shadow. The flickering flame of her lighter is only enough to illuminate the area immediately around her, the dancing light frequently convincing you that something's moving in the darkness. As you narrow your eyes, peering into the murk, you'll swear you've made out a strange shape or two – only to discover what was vexing you was a speck of real-world dust.

There's a dearth of light, then, but this is a place defined by excess. The Maw is a grim undersea retreat for the obscenely privileged, where corpulent elites waddle onboard to stuff their bloated, porcine faces with meats that drip with fat and blood. But even before you meet them, you'll notice everything else is slightly off. If it's not too tall then it's too wide or long, its child-protagonist perspective only partly explaining why tabletops, door handles and levers are all just beyond her reach. Tarsier might over-egg the Dutch angles, but it captures a feeling we're in a world ripped from the night terrors of a child with a fertile imagination.

It's a scary place as it is, but *Little Nightmares* keeps finding ways to make you feel even more vulnerable, whether it's Six's wiry limbs or the roving arms and freakishly long fingers of a blindfolded pursuer. In one harrowing set-piece, those same arms stretch into a cramped room, digits clawing at the walls, as you try to burrow deeper into the corner to escape their reach.

We're never told his name (Tarsier dispenses with introductions, and, indeed, words of any kind) but we know from our time with a preview build that this disturbing fellow is The Janitor. He may no longer have his sight, but his hearing is sharp, and even tiptoeing forward while crouched won't prevent your footsteps from making a noise on bare floorboards. There are carpeted areas in the rooms he prowls, but you'll wince at the creaks that accompany every step in between. It hardly helps that shelves and tables are littered with objects just waiting to be disturbed by an errant nudge.

Or sometimes a deliberate one. At times you'll need a distraction, like when you need to sneak past a rotund chef as he prepares a meal, but his patrol route would ordinarily leave you exposed for too long. Bringing him to one side of the kitchen gives you a clear run to the other, though the process is fraught with tension: the size disparity and the forceful, animalistic bellow he lets out when alerted makes him a deeply persuasive threat. You'll scurry and slide, tucking yourself under wardrobes or behind boxes, but sometimes even that's not enough: if whoever's chasing you spots you as you enter a hidey-hole, they'll dip their heads and slide their hands into the shadows to grab you.

Tarsier establishes such a suffocating, soupy atmosphere that the anxiety of getting caught remains even after you've discovered that checkpoints are generous enough to mean death is no great hindrance. The tangibility of the world is a key factor: a combination of masterful lighting, delicate animation and the total absence of any kind of HUD makes this unreality feel all too plausible. As you shimmy up teetering, unevenly stacked towers of books and dishes, you're left fearful – not that you might fall (your index finger's grip on the right trigger will likely be so tight that Six will never come close to losing hers), but that these precarious piles might topple over mid-climb.

The illusion is irresistible, until the moments it suddenly isn't, where the absence of direction becomes a problem and you die repeatedly as you struggle to divine what the game's asking of you. It doesn't happen often, but it's enough to puncture the oppressive mood until you're through it. In one instance, Six fails to grasp a critical object and we assume our plan is the wrong one until, after repeated failures, we try again and it works. Later, by fluke, the shards from a smashed object obscure an item we need to progress. Then again, the occasional caprices of a convincing physics engine are a worthwhile trade-off for the tactility it provides.

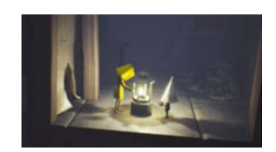
***Little Nightmares'* biggest** problem isn't of its own making. It's an unfortunate coincidence it should arrive after another horror-tinged Scandinavian puzzle-platformer starring a young, unarmed protagonist in a dimly-lit dystopia. Playdead's extraordinary *Inside* casts a long shadow, and Tarsier's game can only suffer in a direct comparison. Nothing here can quite match up to *Inside*'s unforgettable climax; indeed, the ending here borrows a trick from another game, though to identify which would be to spoil the surprise. Still, there are two moments from the final third that have stayed with us. A knuckle-whitening late-game pursuit echoes a sequence from the terrific Korean zombie-horror Train To Busan. And a masterful piece of misdirection provides the game's most chilling moment, when an action doesn't prompt the expected response, but something altogether more unnerving: silence.

More importantly, for its first original property, Tarsier displays the confidence of a genre master. *Little Nightmares* brilliantly locates the sweet spot between curiosity and trepidation, creating that classic horror dilemma where you need to know and yet don't want to find out. It's the kind of game that'll have you advancing into the next room with slow, tentative steps, jamming hard on the right stick to shift the camera as far ahead as it'll let you see, and instinctively shushing whenever something – or someone – makes a noise. And yes, you may well end up fretting over screen smears and specks of dirt. For a game purpose-built to have you jumping at shadows, there aren't many stronger endorsements than that.

8

Developer Tarsier Studios
Publisher Bandai Namco Entertainment
Format PC (version tested), PS4, Xbox One
Release Out now

You'll scurry and slide, tucking yourself under wardrobes and behind boxes, but sometimes even that's not enough



MY HUG BUDDY
Six isn't quite at the bottom of The Maw's food chain. From time to time you'll see little hatted critters – or are they children? – called Nomes skitter out from darkened nooks. They're not a malevolent force, nor are they entirely harmless, since their movements are occasionally enough to attract unwanted attention from the elephantine adults. But they also encourage you to probe the world more carefully by functioning as a sort of collectable. Squeeze through a crack in a wall, for example, and you might find a Nome warming itself by a lantern, prompting you to sweep it up into a hearty cuddle. You can afford to be less delicate with the handful of china dolls spread across the game's five chapters: your objective is to smash them.





ABOVE Happily, clipping issues are rare in *Little Nightmares*, though the ones that do slip through the cracks are especially jarring in a game that works so hard to convince you of the tangible physicality of its world





MAIN Pull a handle and it'll drop with a weighty clunk that will have you wincing in anticipation of someone hearing it. Elsewhere, deep, guttural rumbles resound from the depths of The Maw: things are bad enough where you are, but could it be even worse down there?
ABOVE Tarsier teases several glimpses of the world beyond the fringes of the explorable area, from platforms you can't reach to this set-piece where you cling to a hook that carries you away from danger. Sometimes, routes will wind around and back so you end up somewhere close to where you started.
LEFT You can see why it was first called *Hunger* (a better name, in our book) since The Maw's patrons are utterly ravenous. And, at occasional scripted moments, Six will clutch her stomach, her walking pace slowing to a wounded stagger until she finds some sustenance

Snake Pass

Think like a snake. That's the one-line pitch for Sumo Digital's first original property: a fleshed-out version of an internal game-jam entry from designer Sebastian Liese, who conceived a rudimentary physics-based platformer around the unorthodox movements of a serpentine protagonist. It's also the only instruction you really need in the finished game: at first you'll wish Sumo offered you a little more guidance, but when you're in trouble, it's surprising how often following that simple mantra works a charm.

That's because, despite its colourful, kid-friendly looks, *Snake Pass* treats its subject with the kind of profound respect and attention to nuance you'd more commonly find in a simulation. But then it *is* a simulator, after a fashion. Noodle, the dopey-looking serpentine star, slithers forward at a ponderous pace when you squeeze the right trigger, until you remember that snakes don't move with their bodies in a rigid line. Shift the left analogue stick left and right and you'll glide along at a much faster clip, building up momentum that sees you zip over flat ground and lets you negotiate bumps and slopes more easily when you raise your head by holding the X button. It's rare to be afforded control over the neck muscles of a game character, but then Noodle is no ordinary platforming hero.

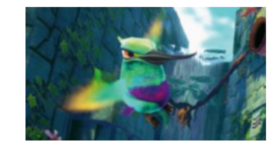
It wouldn't be a platformer without precipitous drops or lethal hazards, of course, and it's in getting past these that the business of thinking like a snake becomes a good deal tougher. First, you'll need to loop around the poles that stretch up to higher ground or across chasms, twisting your body and lifting and dropping your head at the right time to ensure you don't slip off. Feathering the right trigger is key to more delicate manoeuvring, while gripping with the left lets you anchor your lower body, tightening any slack loops that might cause problems as you ascend.

Imagine the simultaneous inputs involved in that process, and you'll understand why it never quite feels natural – even if that's the whole point of the exercise. And while at times your movements will be staccato and awkward, on occasion you'll find moments where it all clicks into place and you'll see Noodle gracefully glide up a network of poles to a high platform without interruption – even if, as you trigger the checkpoint at the top and grin in satisfaction, you might not be entirely sure how you did it.

It's a game with a high skill ceiling, then, and any player with the determination to properly master those idiosyncratic controls and strangely authentic-feeling physics will find plenty of opportunities to show off in the game's sprawling, elaborate levels. They're split into four familiar biomes – earth, water, fire, air – but they're as bright and characterful as anything Sumo has developed for Sega, even if the boggle-eyed lead and David Wise soundtrack mean this is the second game this month to have us pondering what might've been had Nintendo not sold Rare. Within each, you'll need to secure three magical stones to open the exit gate, with 20 blue wisps and five golden coins (which tend to require feats of exceptional dexterity to obtain, or otherwise reward thorough exploration) set as optional goals. And they *are* optional: sensibly, Sumo doesn't gate off later levels behind a certain number of either collectable. You can progress with the stones alone.

Developer/publisher Sumo Digital
Format PC, PS4 (tested), Switch, Xbox One
Release Out now

The challenge is firm but fair, and the physics are forgiving enough to let you get away with the odd mistake



HOVER BOVVER
Noodle is joined on his journey by Doodle, a hummingbird who flits between objects of interest and positions herself on perches to indicate where you should climb next. She can also be called upon to lift Noodle's tail: this features heavily in the final four stages, where powerful updrafts allow the two to cross large gaps between platforms. Alas, she doesn't always respond, and it's not always immediately clear why – OK, she mightn't want to get her feathers wet, but sometimes she'll ignore you when you need a last-minute boost onto a ledge. During the trickier sequences, her presence becomes a nagging irritation, as Noodle's struggles contrast with the ease with which she navigates these worlds. You can almost hear her thinking, "What took you so long?"

You'll probably be glad of that, since the difficulty escalates sharply. For the most part, the challenge is firm but fair, and the physics are forgiving enough to let you get away with the odd mistake. Indeed, *Snake Pass* is often at its best when it lets you fudge your way through its more testing sections. You don't always have to fully engage with the intricacies of wrapping yourself around each pole and timing each stretch to the next with meticulous care. Instead, you might keep the trigger held down and jam the analogue stick this way and that, sending Noodle sliding awkwardly across the top, before making a final, desperate lunge that just about carries you to the other side. Either way, you'll be left flushed with exhilaration.

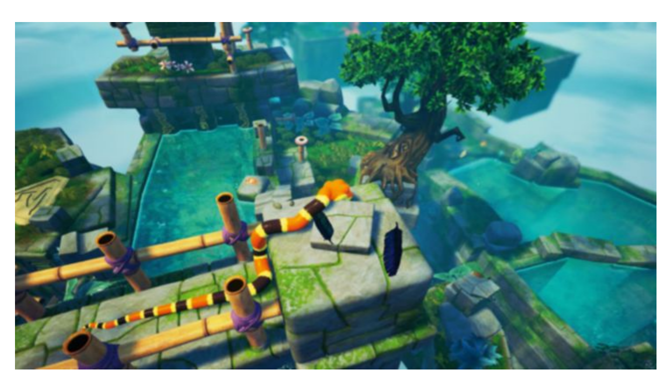
But, sometimes, it leaves you with precious little margin for error, and once or twice its challenge feels needlessly hostile. A lengthy, checkpoint-free section at the end of the sixth stage doesn't so much demand you knuckle down and master those controls as tempt you to throw your controller across the room: it's one of the most sudden and aggressive difficulty spikes we've encountered in a long time. But more frequently it's the camera that spoils things. It's atrocious in underwater sections, though as those sequences tend towards sedate exploration rather than exacting platforming, it's a tolerable kind of problem. Not so much later on. The final chapter combines vicious gusts of wind with narrow ledges and moving platforms: hardly the most enjoyable hazards to overcome, but it's the camera that proves the only insurmountable obstacle. We relish a challenge, but once too often *Snake Pass* fails to provide one of the most crucial tools you need to conquer it.

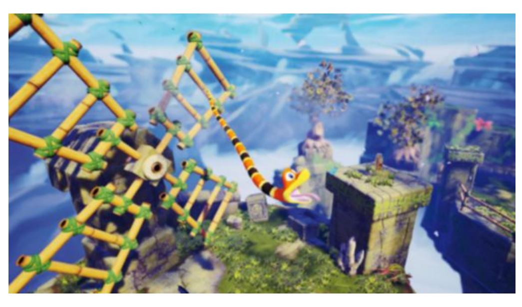
Still, it's surely the best game ever to be named after a Derbyshire road, and Noodle, despite his dopey wailing (which is at least useful in alerting you when his lower body isn't hooked around anything) is wonderfully realised. With a much better camera and less of a fondness for gratuitously fussy challenges – and a tendency not to combine the two – this could have been a minor classic; indeed, there are enough moments of immense gratification that we'd have no hesitation recommending it to anyone quick to learn and slow to anger. Yet we're equally confident that those who don't have the patience of a snake will come away with a feeling closer to blessed relief than pride.

7

RIGHT The hot coals introduced in the third group of stages aren't as deadly as they seem. Noodle can touch them for a few seconds without dying, but since brushing them with the tip of his tail is enough to cause him to yelp in pain you'll be grateful of the leeway.
BELOW It's a very pretty game when the camera's behaving, and it scales down well to Switch: some of the finer details are lost on Nintendo's console, but it's a promisingly robust port.
MAIN Sensibly, Sumo doesn't let the slenderest of stories get in the way. Its resolution, however, suggests either a sequel or DLC may be forthcoming







ABOVE When landing on ground after a fall you'll be relieved if it's been a while since you triggered a checkpoint. Otherwise, given how long it takes to return to your prior position, you might as well throw Noodle to his doom




PlayStation.VR

The Sexy Brutale

Something is amiss at The Sexy Brutale, the casino mansion owned by an enigmatic Marquis. For one thing, none of the guests at this year's masked ball seem to be having a particularly good time. But slightly worse than that, they are also being systematically bumped off by the frightfully brusque staff. It would be bad enough if just one shindig resulted in the death of your guests, but this particular series of events seems to be repeating endlessly, looping back to midday every time the clock strikes midnight.

It falls to protagonist Lafcadio Boone, an elderly priest and recovering gambling addict, to try to figure out what is going on and break the macabre cycle that has befallen the other revellers. Boone is in a position to do this because he has the ability to remember events each time the day restarts, a power bestowed on him by a mysterious girl covered in blood, who also offers guidance throughout the game.

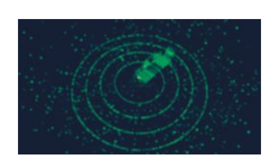
Preventing each murder requires you to sneak about, spying through keyholes and eavesdropping on conversations from cupboards, as you build up a picture of how the act is carried out and who is responsible. The movements of characters that you observe are recorded on your map, and you can scrub back and forth through the timeline to figure out if there are any gaps in your knowledge that might provide the key to solving a certain puzzle.

Unless you're skulking in a wardrobe or standing on a mezzanine, however, you can't be in the same room as any of the other guests or staff. If you do find yourself occupying the same chamber as another person, time will stop and their mask will detach, float into the air and chase you. If it gets too close it will begin sapping your energy, eventually causing you to collapse and then wake up at the beginning of the day again. But the blood-soaked woman has imbued your mask with a little protection, slowing down the others and buying you some time to escape the room. Once you're on the other side of a door, the mask will return to its owner and they will be oblivious to what just happened, so you can get back to spying on them.

Every character goes about their business in exactly the same way each day, and their actions – and eventual demises – will always occur at the same time. You might need to wind your way through these tightly choreographed dances three or four times before you've established what needs to be done – switching a live shotgun cartridge for a blank one, for example – and a few more loops after that to figure out exactly how your plan can be achieved. You don't have to wait out the full cycle each time: you can restart the day at any point by tapping L2, causing you to wake up at whichever grandfather clock – each of which serves as a save point and must be fixed before use – you most recently synced your pocket watch to. Later, you'll gain the ability to fast forward through each 12-hour period to either 4pm or 8pm.

Developer Cavalier Game Studios
Publisher Tequila Works
Format PC, PS4, Xbox One
Release Out now

Preventing each murder requires you to sneak about, spying through keyholes and eavesdropping on conversations



SNOOPER'S CHARTER
You can peek through most keyholes by tapping Square while standing next to a door, and then moving the narrow viewing cone left or right using the left stick. You might not be able to see everything that's going on in a room even when you can hear the conversation, so sometimes you'll need to watch events unfold from another angle in order to come up with a suspect. While your main map gradually builds to a full floorplan of the mansion, holding L2 at any time also brings up a pulled-back, isometric representation of your immediate surroundings, which shows footsteps, speech and other sound sources. You can use this to figure out where a character is heading if you happen to lose sight of them.

While the game has Metroidvania elements, not least in the way that your gradually expanding range of powers grants you deeper access to the intricately laid-out mansion, developer Cavalier sticks to a more compartmentalised structure. You'll be focused on, and sometimes even trapped in, particular sections of the building and must solve each murder in order, rather than flitting between them in an open world. When you save a guest (or guests: on several occasions you'll need to rescue two people simultaneously) they'll remove their mask and you'll have the opportunity to speak to them. In doing so, you'll acquire a new power. It's only a brief respite for them, however, as when the clocks reset they'll continue to relive their last day while you strut about the place now able to pick locks, say, or listen in on whispered conversations.

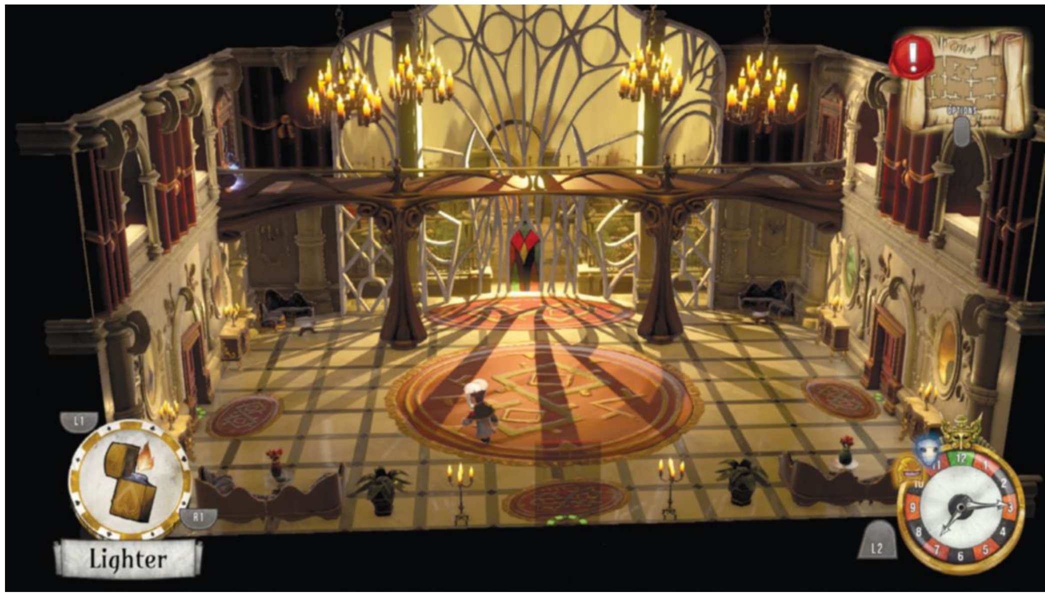
There's a satisfying solidity to the interlocking events that occur each day. A gunshot or ringing bell can be heard from most areas of the mansion, and guests will react to sounds and events in ways that help to reinforce the sense of everything being connected. The game's excellent music – which often sounds like Pink Floyd having a crack at cabaret – is also neatly folded into events, each area boasting its own tune that builds to a crescendo at the exact moment the guest or guests in that section die. This plentiful cross-referencing, along with the changing light as the day progresses through each four-hour period, helps to ensure that the potentially daunting amount of information you must process never becomes overwhelming.

The robust nature of this interplay is mostly carried over to the game's technical underpinnings, too. *The Sexy Brutale* looks sumptuous, each room an intricate, beautifully-lit diorama occupied by charming chibi characters, but the engine occasionally struggles under the weight of all the moving parts. It never becomes a problem, but the game will very occasionally drop the odd frame or two as you transition between rooms. It's a small price to pay for such a richly realised world, however, and never hinders your exploration – even when, later on, you're occasionally asked to move through half a dozen rooms at speed.

The Sexy Brutale's world is a delightful place in which to immerse yourself. The time-bending, snooping and cutely macabre atmosphere recall bizarre and ambitious Japanese gems such as *Majora's Mask* and *Gregory Horror Show*, but Cavalier has imbued the whole thing with a distinctly British flavour that makes the setup feel fresh. As a result, like the mysterious mansion at its centre, this assured adventure will draw you into its world, and keep you there.

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ABOVE Blue circles denote interactive objects – such as cupboards in which you can hide – while green circles mark your exits. RIGHT The mansion is an intricate maze of rooms, but also hides all manner of secrets to discover – some of which are amusingly surreal, and others rather moving



BELOW Working out the cause of death and a perpetrator isn't usually too taxing, but figuring out how to change the course of events can pose some real head-scratchers





ABOVE The cast are a memorable – and likeable – bunch, but it's The Sexy Brutale's staff who steal the show. By turns rude, put upon and hubristic, they get all the best lines as they go about their work with cold efficiency

Outlast 2

Very early on in *Outlast 2* we find ourselves screaming on the ground, penis severed, as we bleed out from our freshly inflicted injury. It's a horrifying, grotesque moment, and a particularly sticky end for protagonist and cameraman Blake Langermann. But it's also one of many we endure over the next few minutes as we attempt to deal with the tall, hooded, spiked-hammer-wielding female who emerges from the fog, on cue, every time we pass a trigger point in that section of the level.

On our second attempt we edge forward to the line that sets the AI in motion, and are cut down by the fast-moving woman as we attempt to turn tail and run. The third time, we manage to hide behind a run-down shack and then watch as she despawns – only to reappear 30 seconds later and plunge her weapon into our abdomen after we fail to locate the exit. On our fourth run at it we attempt to dash straight past her and suffer a similar fate. During the fifth, we climb into a locked house through the window, but find no way through. We come back out and finally spot that there's a narrow gap beneath the wall of a barn that we can wriggle under – but we're executed while doing so. On our sixth try we make it through, bleeding from a glancing blow, and dust ourselves off.

By this point, any tension that was present when we first ventured into the set-piece has been entirely wrung out and replaced with frustration and hollow relief. And it's just one of many such encounters, where the margins for error are so fine that they feel more like mechanical obstacle courses than spaces in which to panic and improvise – something the first *Outlast* provided in spades. One section later on, involving two enemies and a claustrophobic dorm area, feels more like a clockwork puzzle than a stealth-survival challenge, such is the specificity of the course you're required to steer through it.

The overbearing influence of Red Barrels' apparent desire to create a more curated, directed experience is compounded by a breakdown in readability. While you can hide in cupboards, crouch in long grass and skulk in the shadows, it's hard to know whether you're visible. The absence of any kind of meter would be fine were it not for the unpredictable reactions of the AI – enemies might miss you from a few feet away, or yank you out of a hiding place you clambered into long before their arrival. The entire game is shrouded in atmospheric darkness and fog, but the way forward (or even what's expected of you in a given area) is often obfuscated to a degree that doesn't feel sporting. One particularly farcical moment sees us lead a conga line of murderous hillbillies around a swamp as we look for the right building to leap through to get to the next area.

Don't get us wrong: *Outlast 2* is a terrifying game, and some sections are unbearably tense. Even more so than the original game, Red Barrels' sequel channels the excellent 2005 horror flick The Descent during its nerve-shredding endgame. It's also the grimmest, darkest horror game in recent memory, and the unrelentingly nasty nature of its subject matter, though wonderfully written, may prove too much for some. However, it's telling that the one sequence during which we actually feel like we're having *fun* – a short cat-and-mouse hunt in a pitch-black, partially flooded underground space in the company of a crazed, torch-wielding pursuer – feels like a direct lift from the first game.

At least the cast's performances are enthusiastic. Langermann reacts with naturalistic horror and bemusement at the awful situations he witnesses or endures while searching for his missing wife, investigative journalist and reporter Lynn, and wrestles with demons from his past. The gibbering cultists that you encounter throughout the game are genuinely unnerving, too, and a fine complement to the game's powerful, unsettling sound design.

Red Barrels also toys with your senses to a greater degree than in the first game. Bright flickering light sources are mischievously placed right in the middle of otherwise pitch-black chase sequences, for example, the abrupt change in illumination forcing you to switch between your camera's night vision and normal settings while you desperately look for a way to escape whatever is chasing you.

Outlast 2 also introduces a new mechanic in the form of a sensitive camera microphone. Using it allows you to locate enemy positions through walls and in total darkness without resorting to the more battery-hungry night-vision mode, though you can have both modes active at once if you choose. It's a smart idea, but while a couple of sequences make good use of this gameplay device, it never feels like Red Barrels explores its full potential. The same is true of the newly introduced option to peek while hanging from a ledge, for that matter, which – on normal difficulty, at least – is entirely unnecessary.

On finishing the first *Outlast* we immediately started the game over again on the highest difficulty setting, such was the potency of its depiction of vulnerability and the leeway it gave you to improvise, and run and hide from danger. However, by the time we reached the end of *Outlast 2* we felt drained for all the wrong reasons. In leaving the confines of its predecessor's psychiatric hospital setting for the wilds of southern Arizona, Red Barrels' horror series has somehow become more linear and less pliable. And now, in the long shadow cast by Capcom's excellent *Resident Evil VII*, Red Barrels' macabre tricks are made to appear somewhat less dazzling.

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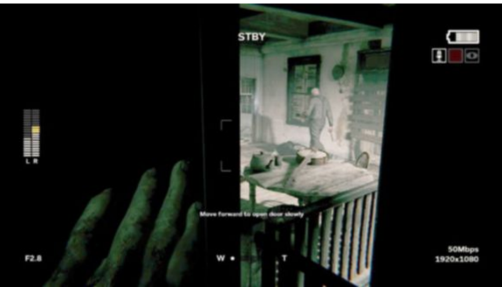
Developer/publisher Red Barrels
Format PC, PS4 (tested), Xbox One
Release Out now

Any tension that was present when we first ventured into the set-piece has been wrung out and replaced with frustration



REVIEW COPY
Throughout, various key events occur that Langermann can capture on his camera along with the various bits of text you find. Doing so involves keeping your camera trained on the subject or moment while a circular red bar fills. You can then review this footage at any time by switching to your inventory – which, in a nice touch, sees you look down at your camera and two pockets containing your batteries and bandages. Langermann spouts some rambling insight about each event as you watch the footage back. Unfortunately, he also repeats your vague objective ("Find Lynn, nothing else matters," for example) every time you look, which quickly becomes irritating.





ABOVE This sequence should be a terrifying one, but its trigger points and AI routes are all too obvious once you've been made to repeat it a couple of times thanks to poor signposting, which blights the game throughout



TOP A couple of terrifying sections see you having to crawl through cornfields while trying to avoid capture. It's during these moments that the new microphone feature proves particularly effective. MAIN *Outlast 2*'s cultist theme presents some extreme – and often upsetting – situations, but the story is handled with affecting humanity that works its way under your skin. RIGHT The option to look back while running, by holding L1, remains an effective trick. But the speed of *Outlast 2*'s enemies feels ill-tuned – you'll die regularly while figuring out what to do, and checkpointing is often miserly



Lego Worlds

Lego Worlds is not another Lego game that merely features Lego. It isn't a jaunt through a set of levels themed around a big licence. There's no Harry Potter, Star Wars or Batman; its moment-to-moment appeal is not founded on smashing up scenery and discovering fan-favourite characters. Instead, *Lego Worlds* is a game about Lego itself. It's about building and exploring, and open and freewheeling play, and is the first fresh step Traveller's Tales has taken with the licence since 2005's original *Lego Star Wars*. And while it arrives eight years after *Minecraft*, Lego's enduring ubiquity lends it currency that makes it still count.

As *Minecraft* is founded on its blocks, *Lego Worlds* is founded on its bricks, and it's the beneficiary of sophisticated procedural generation tech that constructs worlds out of perfectly fitted 2x4 bricks, 2x6 plates and 3x2 slopes. They comprise every hillock and mesa, tree and volcano. Dig down and you'll see the bricks aren't surface-deep; the land is stratified layers of the stuff.

Knowing these places can technically be made with boxes of real-world Lego gives them an immediate appeal, especially since they look so genuine. Traveller's Tales' Lego has always looked good, capturing its perfect glossiness and the clarity of its forms. In *Lego Worlds*, struck by the rising of a virtual sun, sending shadows creeping across the ground before it reaches its zenith, Lego looks positively glorious.

Worlds are generated across various themed biomes. There's rolling farmland dotted with trees and crops, populated by cows, pigs and farmers. There's hilly swampland with thick mangroves and houses on stilts, cut through by channels of shallow water and occupied by hostile alligators. There's a candy world, one of scrap metal, a Wild West, and surprises might be found anywhere: a town; caverns with chests to be discovered; dungeons with traps. But as fun as the biomes are, they lack the naturalistic coherence of *Minecraft*'s Overworld.

You'll discover these lands through a setup that does its best to keep out of the way. You're exploring the galaxy in your ship, the Pug-Z, when, having collided with a comet, you crash land on a small, preset, pirate-themed world that acts as the start of a tutorial which introduces each of the powerful building tools.

The first is the Discovery Tool. By aiming it at objects, creatures and characters you can copy them into your inventory and then, for a small amount of the freely collectible currency, Studs, place them at will. One common use is to complete quests. Located at beacons that extend into the sky, these are doled out by NPCs with various simple requests, having you build or find something, or colour their homes.

Quests are meant to give you a sense of purpose in worlds that would otherwise give you little extrinsic reason to play. But in practice they send you on dull expeditions to find objects that could be anywhere.

Developer Traveller's Tales
Publisher Warner Bros
Format PC, PS4 (version tested), Xbox One
Release Out now

Lego finally has creative expression in videogame form, but it depends heavily on its players' imaginations



GENERATION GAME
The promise of procedural generation is practically infinite worlds to visit and explore. The reality in *Lego Worlds* can be a little messy. Forms made from bricks can blend into others, such as in the Junkyard Jungle biome, which features stacks of junk cars, shipping containers and giant tyres. Props will be incongruously scattered with little reason: Junkyard Jungle is strewn with drum kits, diggers and DJ setups. Naturally, if you don't like a world you can jet off and generate a new one, but even in ideal conditions the tangles of enemies and quest-givers can lead to situations where you're being beaten up by a swamp monster while being rewarded for completing a quest. You'll also follow many beacons only to find nothing on the surface because they're frustratingly indicating chests hidden far below.

There's little of the curated systemic design of *Minecraft*, where crafting systems push you through the world.

And yet you'll need to do quests because of their rewards. Some are links in a chain. Some rewards will be Studs. And some will be Gold Bricks, the main currency for progression in *Lego Worlds*. As you earn them, you'll get access to various useful gadgets – a lamp for underground exploration, perhaps, or a grapple for speedily moving around the world. Additionally, your ship will slowly upgrade, giving access to larger worlds. These are accessed from a galaxy map, from which you can generate a new land at any time, previewing it before setting course. Once you've visited them, the worlds are persistent, so you can revisit them to complete quests you've missed or been unable to fulfil, as well as return to constructions of which you're particularly proud.

Lego Worlds leans on the brute appeal of using Gold Bricks to drive you to play, but it more critically has to lean on the intrinsic appeal of building and playing with all the vehicles and pre-built kits in the game. To that end, there's the Landscape Tool, which allows you to freely paint Lego into the world or remove it.

The scope of the Landscape Tool exposes some of the limits of the engine. On PS4 it can take a moment for bricks to load in or disappear. It also reveals the limitations of manipulating a 3D world with a gamepad on a 2D screen: it can be hard to see precisely where you'll be editing, especially when your cursor is obscured inside existing terrain, and moving it up and down with the shoulder buttons while having analogue control over its horizontal placement is awkward.

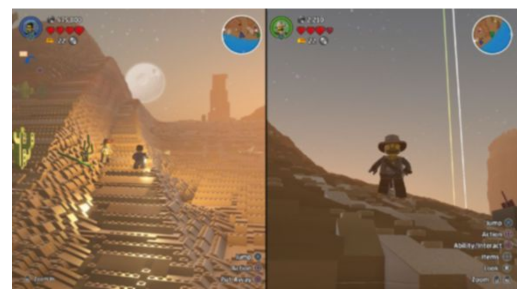
Other tools help, including the self-explanatory Copy, and the the Build Tool, which gives you fine-grained control over exactly where to place bricks taken from a steadily unlocked palette of every core brick in Lego's real-world collection. If you've the patience to work with it, anything you can build with real Lego is possible. With robust online and splitscreen options, the stage is set in *Lego Worlds* for co-op building and imaginative play, with cowboys and witches shooting from a fighter plane into castles you've made.

But the worlds are only a stage. Being limited to base Lego, you can't make anything other than inert things. There's none of the redstone machine-making of *Minecraft* or the intuitive game-making that's possible in *Disney Infinity*. Perhaps in the future, Lego Technic can be brought into the fold and *Worlds'* potential will fully unfurl. For now, Lego finally has creative expression in videogame form, but it depends heavily on its players' imaginations. For some, that'll come easy, and hours of play lie within its countless worlds. Others might well hanker after a return visit to one of a decade's worth of licensed platformers.

6



LEFT One of the pleasures of *Lego Worlds* is its ability to look great whether viewed at world scale or zoomed right in on the brickwork. BELOW Painting colours on to bricks is made analogue by the way you get graded tones from the edge of your paintbrush. MAIN It can be a strain to crane the camera around to see the visual hints about what items an NPC wants, since they're displayed in a speech bubble in the world



ABOVE As with all the *Lego* games, *Worlds* comes alive when played in splitscreen, but it supports online too. In either case, players can be adventuring together or building separately on opposite sides of the world





Everything

David OReilly's interactive debut invited us to watch a *Mountain*; for its successor, he's cast his net much wider. *Everything*'s hook is the ability to assume control of, well, everything, living or otherwise. You can commandeer a cow or hijack a street lamp, float around as a grain of sand, or observe an accelerated day-night cycle as a shifting landmass. It purports to be an interactive nature simulation, but that suggests a recognisable imitation, when this is altogether stranger.

OReilly gives his players a little more to do, as well as be, this time. Inhabit, say, a cedar tree, and you can turn one into a group by holding a button when adjacent to others. Later you'll gain the ability to draw in other flora, just as pagodas and skyscrapers, or cakes and fried eggs, can band together. You'll ascend and descend through layers of existence, moving onto planets, star clusters and entire galaxies until you reach an atomic level and the cycle starts anew. This time, the tiniest object you now inhabit may – and in all likelihood will – take you someplace completely different from before, perhaps not even bound to an earthly plain.

There are whispers of *Journey* in the ability to communicate by 'singing' to other objects, while in the rudimentary animation of its subjects and their steadily increasing scale, it resembles an arthouse *Katamari Damacy*. Yet the Keita Takahashi game to which it's most closely related is *Noby Noby Boy*, since both are absurdist sandboxes where joy is found in unlikely interactions between seemingly unrelated things.

At regular intervals, you'll happen across audio snippets from lectures by the late British philosopher Alan Watts. Chances are that the clip playing will be only tenuously connected to what's unfolding on screen. Yet the overriding message – that we and all things are integral parts of a glorious whole – percolates, promoting an atmosphere of warmth and optimism.

You might wonder at times whether OReilly isn't trying to pull a practical joke, one designed to have critics scrambling to derive meaning from a snooker table spouting non sequiturs as an oversized tardigrade floats by. Thoughts you accumulate from 'talking' to objects are as likely to be asinine or inconsequential as to strike a note of searing profundity, depending on the emotional baggage the player brings with them. This scattergun approach results in periods of tedium mixed with flashes of emergent comedy and surreal brilliance. Still, if nothing else, the wide-eyed manner in which *Everything* explores the interconnectedness of, well, everything feels faintly radical in these divided times – even when that means you somehow find yourself relating to a spiral of sentient poop.

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Developer David OReilly
Publisher Double Fine Productions
Format PC, PS4 (tested)
Release Out now



ASSIMILATION THEORY
Everything is not entirely without goals, and it even has one or two light puzzles. After a while, you'll be invited to return to where you began your journey; after descending into a hell of bitterness and misery, you'll be tasked with finding a way to escape it. OReilly is keen not to hold you up for too long, however. If you can't work it out, you'll soon be given some less-than-cryptic clues to the solution.

Achieving 100 per cent completion might seem a rather onerous long-term goal, but with the ability to pick up things belonging to the same category as you pass by, your total percentage will increase quicker than you realise



Korix

An unexpected, but pleasant, consequence of VR has been the reinvigoration of unfashionable genres. Developers committed to the format are exploring fresh ways to tackle old ideas, exploring the new possibilities of the tech while adapting to its limitations. Just as *Until Dawn: Rush Of Blood* exhumed the lightgun shooter, and Secret Sorcery's *Tethered* revisited the god game, *Korix* rebuilds the RTS from its foundations with the help of an intuitive interface, clever controls and an admirably robust challenge.

In conceptual terms, it's nothing new. Each mission involves harvesting energy from a nearby crystal, constructing defences, assembling an offensive force and destroying your opponent's base. Its battles take place on tiled stages, suspended in space against a backdrop of polygonal planets. Workers and soldier units may be nothing more than diminutive cuboids, but the adorable miniature tanks and aircraft you'll command on later sorties have the tactile appeal of board-game pieces. The minimalist aesthetic means the action runs smoothly, even when your opponent sends out waves of invaders of two dozen units or more.

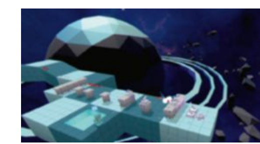
It's vital you keep your workers protected. If taken out of commission, they'll regenerate, but the delay will leave you with little energy to build new units. There seems no point investing in soldiers: having waited until we could send out a group of six, they were wiped out within seconds of reaching the enemy base by a fresh swarm of rival units. Even tanks are vulnerable to the sheer weight of numbers the AI pumps out, unless you hold back enough energy to send several at once. Your best bet, then, is to build walls to push deeper into enemy territory. Each new wall must be within a certain distance of the previous one, but they're a cheap way to gain ground, and you can place lasers, artillery and pace-slowing pulsars on top, using your energy reserves to strengthen fortifications and upgrade your ordnance. They can also be used to funnel enemy groups towards your most powerful guns, while simultaneously delaying their arrival at your base.

The difficulty curve quickly steepens – perhaps too quickly. An assault on two fronts seems just too much for your meagre resources, especially when one crystal is depleted, forcing your workers into a long trek to a storage unit to harvest from another. Its extortionate cost will leave a sizeable hole in your defence budget. It's the kind of balancing act that defines any half-decent strategy, but here the scales are too firmly tipped in the AI's favour. Still, that's no issue in the thrillingly tense PvP skirmishes, which is where *Korix* may convince you VR is the ideal home for the RTS.

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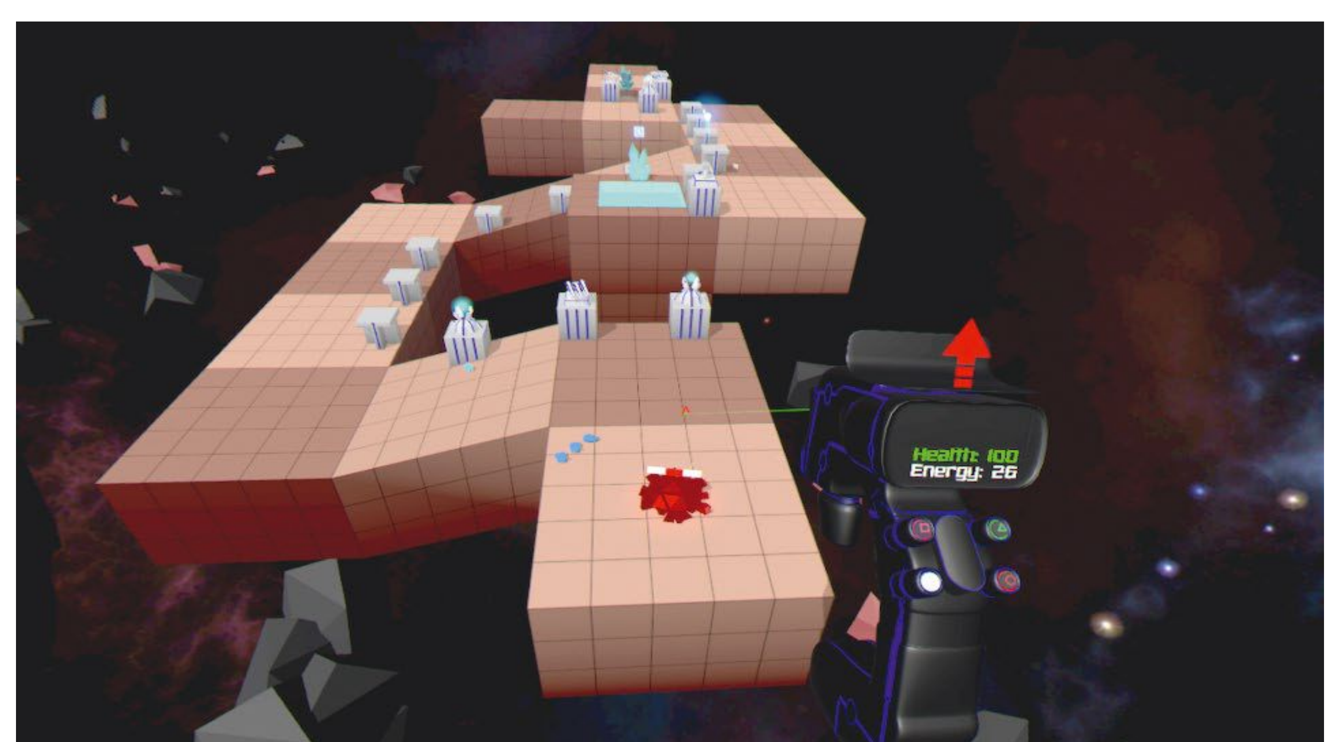
Earlier levels can be replayed with newly unlocked units in Skirmish mode. But the scoring system seems flawed, rewarding you for sustaining a battle long enough to destroy lots of enemies, rather than prizing efficiency

Developer/publisher StellarVR
Format PSVR
Release Out now



GROUND CONTROL

Korix strongly recommends you use a Move controller, and the wand is certainly an improvement on the DualShock 4, which suffers from occasional tracking issues. Whichever you choose, you'll see it physically represented within the game – but while the buttons match their position on the controller, the design looks strikingly different. Displaying your inputs on screen is a smart idea, avoiding any potential confusion over which buttons you're pressing, while the pointer comfortably handles unit placement and selection.





The Stanley Parable

What it means to play a game about games

By Alex Wiltshire

Developer/publisher Galactic Cafe **Format** PC **Release** 2013

This is the story of a man named Stanley. It's also the story of a player named you, and two game developers named Davey Wreden and William Pugh. It's at once a meditation on choice, freedom and authority, on what videogames are, and on the relationship between developer and player. And it's extremely funny. In fact, *The Stanley Parable* is one of the funniest videogames you can play, bearing the weight of its themes with absurdist lightness.

Stanley has started another day at work, pushing buttons on his keyboard as he always does – only today is different. No one is in the office. So he goes to the meeting room to see if his colleagues are there; they are not. He goes up to his boss' office and it's empty, too. But he manages to open a hidden door, which leads to him discovering the terrible secret behind his workplace. Stanley knows his purpose now, and destroys the facility that's been governing his life, allowing him to escape into the real world.

If you do what you're told in *The Stanley Parable*, you experience a story that you've played hundreds of times before: you're on a hero's journey, the nobody who becomes the somebody, the star of a world generated just for you. On a planet of 7.5 billion other people, you get a fleeting sense of feeling special. But in *The Stanley Parable*, the credits don't roll when victory comes. The view returns to Stanley's dingy office and the Narrator, in his perfectly modulated, BBC-announcer voice, once again says, "All of his co-workers were gone. What could it mean?" So starts an eternal loop, a Garden Of Forking Paths, where you'll choose your own path through Stanley's winding office. Choose this corridor or that door; submit to or disobey directions; make this choice or that one, taking wildly different plotlines, each resulting in one of 19 possible endings. Whichever way you go, you'll always be accompanied by the Narrator.

Voiced by Kevan Brighting, the Narrator is the focal point of *The Stanley Parable*, a constant throughout the surreal, surprising, disturbing and confusing events that you'll set into action. Though Stanley's office feels distinctly American, the Narrator is resolutely British, commenting on all you do with the authoritative tone of a documentary voiceover. He lends gravitas to Stanley's mundane situation, a presence that you're initially inclined to obey, or at least to take seriously. But as you begin to defy him, he starts to become a character, turning from talking about Stanley in the thirdperson to addressing him directly, becoming by turns prideful, injured, sneering, domineering, wheedling, chummy, recriminating, angry, callous.

The Narrator is, after all, not only the antagonist of *The Stanley Parable* but also the architect of its nightmarish maze of choices. The different stories you follow are all his, and your decision to follow them or not will delight or enrage him. The Narrator and Stanley are inextricably tied together, each unable to exist without the other. Take the Zending, where the Narrator is trying to get you to remain in a room filled with a starfield and light patterns. "Don't you see that it's killing us, Stanley? I just... I want it to stop. I would – we would both be so much happier if we just... stopped," he says. "If we just stay right here, right in this moment, with this place... Stanley, I think I feel... happy. I actually feel happy."

But you can't stay there. Well, you technically *can*, but you're playing this game to be able to do something, and so you walk out, finding a series of stairs that lead up to a point you can throw yourself off. "Oh, no! Stay away from those stairs! If you hurt yourself, if you die, the game will reset! We'll lose all of this!" the Narrator exclaims. You'll survive the first fall, but presented with little else to do other than stand passively under the starfield, you'll try it again. "My god, is this really how much you dislike my game?" he says. "I just wanted us to get along, but I guess that was too much to ask." On the third attempt you finally die, and the game begins anew.

The Narrator is many things, from motivator to exposition-dealer, but most of all, he's a representation of *The Stanley Parable*'s developers – or, at least, their relationship with players. His mood swings are an expression of the strain that lies between designers' intentions and players' free will, the way that narrative-driven

One of the endings features a nail-biting countdown to the facility exploding. Buttons placed around the control room suggest you can stop it if you can only figure them out, but the Narrator sneers at your hope to save yourself

games are designed around second-guessing the ways in which players will do the wrong thing or go the wrong way, whether intentionally or because they weren't paying attention. He frets when the player breaks sequence and sees areas he hasn't built, over plotting that doesn't make dramatic sense, and over the game itself: would it be more popular if it was *Minecraft* or *Portal 2*?

Sometimes the Narrator conflates Stanley and you, the player, talking to both at once. Near Stanley's office is a closed door with a sign reading 'Broom Closet'. Almost every door is either closed or controlled by the game design, but if you should try it, this one will open. "Stanley stepped into the broom closet, but there was nothing here, so he turned around and got back on track," says the Narrator. Stay in there, and he tries again: "There was nothing here. No choice to make, no path to follow, just an empty broom closet. No reason to still be here." If you persist, the Narrator becomes increasingly frustrated and begins to mock the idea of you bragging to your friends about getting the "broom closet ending" and sneers at Stanley for only getting his job through family connections. Eventually he starts to fantasise that you, the player, has died and will be replaced by someone else who's filled in on "the history of narrative tropes in videogaming".

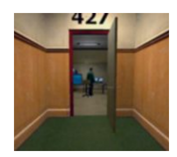
Having the game respond so richly to your action (or, here, inaction), feels greatly rewarding. If you reenter the cupboard on another playthrough, the Narrator will resolve not to react, knowing it'd only encourage you. And then, on the next playthrough, you'll see the door is boarded up so you can no longer get inside. *The Stanley Parable* knows how some of the greatest rewards in videogames come from noticing details you weren't pointed towards, like the scribblings on a whiteboard in a meeting room or the display on a monitor, and that there's magic in having a game respond when you do something you think wasn't expected. So when the Narrator spends some three minutes remarking on you standing in a cupboard you had the notion to enter, or reacts when you have the wild idea of trying to jump off a platform on to a gantry, it's like a spark has jumped between you and the game, a reward beyond an XP bar going up for doing what you were told.

EVENTUALLY HE STARTS TO FANTASISE THAT YOU, THE PLAYER, HAS DIED AND WILL BE REPLACED BY SOMEONE ELSE

It's much quieter than the Narrator, but it's the level design that's making these moments really work, nudging your attention towards them while making them feel like secrets. Another dimension of *The Stanley Parable*'s grand joke about videogames is that under all of its subversion it's very strictly controlled, funnelling you into rat runs that only let you move one way. Doors open and close at the level's whim and most of the choices you're presented with are binary, letting you go one way or the other and closing off the



The museum provides insights into the game's development, showing the ideas William Pugh submitted that landed him the job of co-designing it



BEGINNING AND END

The Stanley Parable began life as a mod for *Half-Life 2*. Davey Wreden released it in 2011, three months after the debut of *Portal 2*, and both games share a thematic tension between the creator and player. The mod lacks the 2013 full release's 'office-real' visual style, since it uses *Half-Life 2* art assets, but it features the same structure and Kevan Brighting's exemplary voice work, and it has six endings. After completing the commercial release of *The Stanley Parable*, which is also built in Source, Wreden went on to make the rather more affecting *The Beginner's Guide*, which continues to explore the relationship between game creator, game and player. Pugh has also continued to make narrative games with his studio, Crows Crows Crows, pursuing a purer line in comedy.



When you're returned once again to the bland realism of the office after completing an ending, its familiarity is a depressing reminder of the looping nightmare you're in

entrance after you go through. Its first moment of choice is a masterclass in spatial and narrative design. Beginning at Stanley's desk, you make a few turns through the bland and deserted office and reach a room with two open doors opposite its entrance. "When Stanley came to a set of two open doors, he entered the door on his left," says the Narrator, and you immediately begin to appreciate what this game might be. Go left and the Narrator continues his story, leaving you wondering what would've happened had you gone right. Go right and he says, "This was not the correct way to the meeting room, and Stanley knew it perfectly well. Perhaps he wanted to stop by the employee lounge first, just to admire it." And we're complicit in the ruse, knowing the game's primed to respond to every choice we make.

"The pacing of this opening section was important to get right – this corridor has been moved and altered to make sure the player reaches the two doors in a good time," says a placard in a museum that lies down one of the game's routes. This place is a literal record of the game's development, exhibiting level plans, 3D assets and trailers in monumental white halls. It's a moment in which the circle between game, developer and player is fully completed, and then, once we've toured all of its galleries, we're left with no other option than to allow ourselves to be swept back into the office and let the cycle move on.

The Stanley Parable rests on this tension: of how narrative-based videogames can't proceed without our input, and how they struggle to make this input meaningful. When you have too much choice, no decision has any particular value, and yet when your path is entirely preordained there's no real consequence to your involvement. Playing games is so often a contradiction: in picking up the controller we want to submerge ourselves in the world of a game designer, and yet we constantly wish to break free of the decisions they make for us. Like that of the Narrator and Stanley, it can be an abusive relationship, but in it can also lie the reason we play – those sparks of connection where a game acknowledges our individual presence. "I'm not your enemy, really, I'm not," says the Narrator. "I realise that investing your trust in someone else can be difficult. However, the fact is that the story has been about nothing but you all this time." ■



The meeting room is filled with send-ups of corporate culture, a sleight of comedic misdirection that lends the real theme greater surprise





JAMES LEACH

Postcards From The Clipping Plane

Conveniently ignoring the serious side of videogame development

Now I've been working on videogames since the early '90s, and regularly collaborate with teams who've been doing so for longer than that. We've seen the industry grow from flickering, buzzing blobs to worlds so realistic and immersive that people forget to eat while they're playing them. Or worse – they graze on junk food while playing them and poo unheedingly in their chairs. The advancements have been, it's fair to say, extremely rapid, if occasionally smelly.

Thirty years of serious game development does mean, however, that there are hordes of us wandering around conventions and expos, being referred to as 'veterans'. It's not a title I have ever felt comfortable with, but it's hard to argue against it when many of those who use the word weren't even born when I was finishing *Dungeon Keeper*. And some of the people saying it are CEOs of their own outfits.

The long history and great maturity of the development world has also led to an interesting phenomenon; as a veteran, it's possible to say to teams working on new products, "But this is how we've always done it." It's not a commonplace phrase or saying, granted, because developer types are usually fairly agile of mind and are happy to learn and evaluate and see things, well, differently. But hit middle age and it does get harder to learn new processes and take on board fresh approaches, especially when they're complex and being explained by youngsters typing so fast that your bifocals lag.

Not long ago I spent a lovely day in a wood with a few guys my age. Although that in itself is another sign of middle age in a certain sort of man, this was actually for work. We were recording a page of crucial lines for a game, which were to be delivered in a forest. We had the voice actors, the wind was rustling realistically because, to be honest, we were genuinely there and it was real. It went smoothly and all was well.

I mentioned the arboreal recording session to an entirely different audio engineer in a studio a few weeks later, thinking he'd be



We've seen the industry grow from flickering, buzzing blobs to worlds so immersive people forget to eat while playing

rather impressed at our attention to veracity. He was about 11 years old and was shocked that we'd bothered. It wasn't that children like him hate going to woods and greatly prefer clacking around morosely on their skateboards in Argos car parks. He was firmly of the opinion that adding ambient forest sounds to clearly delivered lines done properly was not only clearer, but sounded more like people in a forest. I disagreed to the point where I felt like taking away his hoodie and graffiti pens, but I now think he was right. Not only has the technology moved on to the point where it's quick and effective to add such things later, but because everyone else is doing it. In games, it's how dialogue in woodland sounds. Doing it old-school sounds, at best, old-school and at worst, not very good.

Take explosions. Games, film and TV have conditioned us to expect the sound of a blast to occur at precisely the same time as the blast itself, no matter how far away we are from it. Clearly that doesn't happen in real life, but games have been doing things like this forever, and also doing things like sound effects in new, better ways for long enough that these themselves are part of the genre. We've gone from rubbish to quite good and now they've gone from quite good to amazing. People are now used to amazing, so quite good looks rubbish.

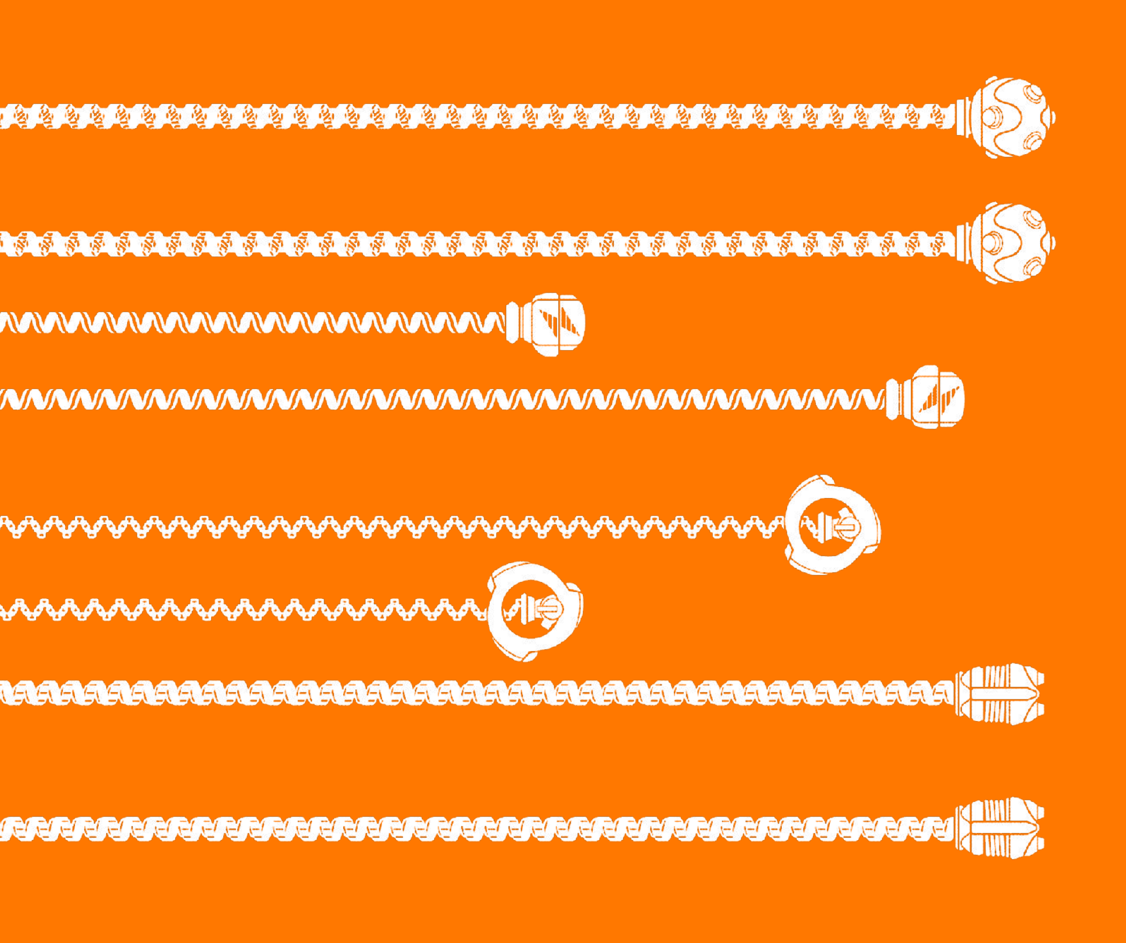
As the sheer power of gaming platforms has risen, another element wise old ancients have to take on board is the – yep, I'm using the word – holistic side. A gorgeously rendered world *has* to sound perfect, with dynamic stereo everywhere, and woodland sounds like every game now exhibits, or it lets the side down. Combat and weapon choices have to be huge because nobody wants to dive for hours into a world where their character has one simple attack elicited by repeatedly mashing one button or key. Or, if you can strive and grind for millions in gold, you'll need millions of things to spend it on.

All of the above really matters when we're talking about huge games made by busloads of team members. The smaller games still getting built by two- or three-person bands are luckily exempt from such worries. Shortcuts and diversions away from the sumptuous are still labelled as quirky or charming, especially if there's a knowing nod to the fact that this is the case. The gaming community, in my experience, demands massive, seamless faux perfection from its worlds, but it's more than capable of falling in love with the smaller, odder offerings. As long as they don't cost the same. These people aren't falling for that one.

James Leach is a BAFTA Award-winning freelance writer whose work features in games and on television and radio

Illustration **Box Kite Curve**

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